head over heels

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/55989490.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
Multi

Fandoms:
Good Will Hunting (1997) RPF, Actor RPF

Relationships:
Ben Affleck/Matt Damon, Ben Affleck/Jennifer "JLO" Lopez

Characters:
Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, Jennifer "JLO" Lopez, Jennifer Garner, Luciana Barroso, Cillian Murphy, Robert Downey Jr., Emily Blunt, Jason Bateman, Natalie Portman

Additional Tags:
Angst, Jealousy, Hollywood, Past Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Unresolved Sexual Tension, middle-aged man problems, high school boston boys flashback, Underage Sex - Freeform, Hand Jobs, Anxiety Attacks, which could mean nothing, the great air/oppenheimer press tours of 2023, Masturbation, Voyeurism, what's an escalating game of gay chicken between best friends, Oral Sex, Anal Sex, Bittersweet Ending, brief appearances from the damon-affleck-muniz children, alexa play bizarre love triangle by new order

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2024-05-18 Completed: 2024-06-24 Words: 24,868
Chapters: 3/3

head over heels

by peggyolson

Summary

"First time I agree to let him direct me and he makes me look like a total schlub," Matt joked, feeling embarrassedly, pleasantly warm.

Bateman looked only mildly entertained as he leaned back in his seat. "If this is how a schlub gets treated, sign me up to play a schlub in his next thing."

Or: Matt, Ben, and their big year back in the spotlight together.

Notes

i started writing this lonnnng before the bennifer divorce rumors started but how serendipitous to be posting it amid the chaos! the timeline of this is all over the place and of course major liberties have been taken in many areas, but the vast landscape of matt/ben lore is my greatest source of joy and bafflement in this life. thank you to claire, without whom i would be nothing <3

reference photos: cursed beach date, cursed *air* set stroll

title from the tears for fears song

Chapter 1

It's not a year for winning, though Ben takes umbrage with his wording.

"While it is, of course, an honor just to be nominated for a St. Louis Gateway Film Critics Association Award—"

"You made that up," Matt says.

"I just find it interesting coming from someone who was in the biggest movie of the year," Ben says, barreling on as if Matt hadn't spoken.

Matt's quick with his retort: "No, we've been over this, that was Gosling in *Barbie*," which earns him the desired result of a loud chorus of boos and fart noises. The light changes, allowing Matt to roll a few inches forward before coming to another dead traffic halt. He adjusts his sunglasses against the glare bouncing off the windshield, blinking harshly against the sun. Adds, "You're *not* nominated for a St. Louis Gateway Film Critics Association Award, by the way. That honor is reserved solely for Viola."

"You do read the email blasts," Ben says, sounding fond.

"Well, Casey works so hard on them."

"He's a shitty fucking intern, man."

"Old fucking intern, too."

"But what can I do — nobody else'll work that cheap."

Matt clicks his tongue. "You're not putting those kids of yours to work yet? That's the whole point of having them."

"It's a violation of child labor laws, or so I'm told," Ben says, his put-upon sigh a tinny echo throughout the car. "Are you trying to get this company involved in a DOL investigation before we can even get it off the ground?"

"All press is good press."

"You *are* always saying that to me," Ben concedes airily. "To the point where I'm starting to wonder… Wait, why are you always saying that to me?"

Matt grins, covering his mouth with the hand not resting uselessly on the steering wheel, even though Ben's not there to perform his favorite activity of digging a playful finger into the ever-deepening lines on his face. They've found each other in matching silly moods that day (Matt's spurred by too much caffeine and too little sleep, Ben's by god knows what), which means that Ben ostensibly calling about something actually important quickly devolving into whatever this is — a goofy, nonsense back and forth they're about three decades too old for — isn't a surprise, but also means that they're probably going to have to have an actual meeting later, likely with a third party there to keep them from doing… Well, this. They've failed before, and the trail of defunct business ventures they leave behind will probably haunt Matt forever, but public failure is less charming when the main thing at stake is your own money. They're not failing yet, though. That has to count for something.

And maybe Matt had been too glib when he implied this isn't their year, or whatever he'd been muttering about when Ben's number had flashed across the dashboard screen after he'd dropped the girls off at school. It may, in fact, be the most *their year* they've had since they'd started having years of this nature together, which he hadn't really stopped to think about until a few weeks earlier, when Downey feigned shock as Matt settled beside him at the latest miscellaneous press event in their never-ending string of miscellaneous press events.

"Oh, how nice of you to join us, Matt," he'd said, his eyes glittering, his voice laced with mirth. "Quick question, you are aware that *this* is your Oscar movie, yes? And also that they don't generally hand them out for Dunkin' Donuts commercials?" Overhearing this while getting her lip gloss touched up across the room, Emily quipped, "Well, not yet."

As if any of them were in any position to throw stones, as if they all hadn't done more humiliating things for a check. This one, at least, made sense: Him gamely by Ben's side, playing the best-reviewed roles of their careers, sliding into a state of such natural ease that it wasn't always clear what was scripted (almost all of it) and what wasn't (Ben's genuine, irreproducible laughter when Matt made fun of him). As if Matt had done it out of necessity, as if their joint appearance wasn't promotion for their fucking production company, for their fucking movie — not the one that'll win Oscars, no, but the one that will matter to him in the grand scheme of things, when he's wasting away on his death bed and his kids are spoon-feeding him Jello as he looks wistfully back on it all. He remembers a time when his jaw was sharper and his hair was blonder, when something as innocuous as a

stupid commercial seemed impossible, borderline taboo, after being told again and again by so many supposedly smart people that to work together was to depreciate their individual value. As if he'd have even considered saying yes if Ben hadn't been the one to ask, pitching it to him with casual flippancy, like Matt had already agreed. Like his involvement was a foregone conclusion.

All of those replies had popped into Matt's head at once, twisting around each other like a jumbled rat king of thoughts, overwhelming him into silence. What he ended up saying was nothing, because the very chipper reporter chose that moment to enter the room, and it was barely Downey's business, let alone Entertainment Weekly's.

Anyway.

"Listen, I was saddled with the responsibility of keeping you happy," Matt says.

Ben scoffs. "*When*?"

Matt hums. "Somewhere between '93 and '96. The timeline's fuzzy — you were so goddamn moody back then."

There's a smile in Ben's voice when he says, "And you were the only one who could pull me out of it."

"Story of my life," Matt sighs, the honesty of it only occurring to him after the words have left his mouth. He's quick to add, "That and the losing, of course."

"Of course," Ben agrees, not sounding offended. "You could put that on a business card. Matt Damon: Multi-Time Award-Losing Actor and —"

"Ben Affleck Mood Wrangler," Matt supplies. "Now there's a real job."

Ben's responding chuckle is a warm, throaty thing. If the sound of it still makes Matt's spine tingle, it's not like anyone will ever know. He bites at his lower lip, tamping down another grin. The light changes again. He's twenty minutes from home.

"So," he says, leaning an elbow against the door. "St. Louis."

*

The sound bites have been tweaked and approved by an extended network of publicists, agents, and Amazon reps, which isn't something they'd had to do the first time around, when they were brand new and boisterous and untrained in a cute way, or even the last time around, when a pandemic had thrown a wrench in their big reunion tour. Wording has been fretted over and picked apart, stories padded and sanitized for the Today Show and Kelly Clarkson and CBS Sunday Morning. They've been encouraged to reminisce about their friendship and look hopefully toward the future, to acknowledge the passage of time but in a way that isn't, like, sad. A charmingly self-deprecating aside about not being able to afford Michael Jordan here, a joke about their advanced ages there. Rinse, repeat, like the old pros they are. Being good on autopilot is basically half of an actor's job.

Except somewhere along the way Ben threads in that genius line. The first time he says it — *First of all, Matt's a genius* — Matt looks at him askance between interviews, bemused but not displeased as an assistant pushes paper cups of coffee into their hands.

"You've become sentient," Matt murmurs, watching a small smile tug at the corners of Ben's mouth as he taps away at his phone. "I'm a *genius*, huh?"

Ben shrugs, eyes darting Matt's way only briefly, private under his lowered lashes. "I have to keep you on your toes somehow. Mind's gotta stay sharp, old man. You're welcome."

"Right," Matt says, running his tongue over his teeth. He bows his head, craning his neck into Ben's space. "It's not because you actually think that or anything."

"Absolutely not," Ben says, pocketing his phone. He sits up straight, his gaze indulgent when it meets Matt's own. "I, as you know, think you're a fucking hack."

The sound bites, as true as they could possibly be given the circumstances, do not even scratch the surface.

*

There's a certain thrill to Ben's directorial style.

It's hard to explain unless you've seen him in action, which Matt only ever had from the sidelines, visiting him on set during the filming of all the movies he hadn't been invited to participate in. (He wasn't bitter, really.) No, there was a difference in being the singular focal point of all that dialed-in attention. Ben-as-director operates with casual intensity different from that of Ben-as-directed, enough that the childlike petulance Matt expected to feel the first time Ben critiqued him never really arrived. For all their overlapping interests, this has always been the area they veer off from each other. Matt likes the freedom of writing, the distanced control of producing, the collaborative surrender of acting, and harbors no secret desire to be the one calling all the shots. He's happy where he is — a careful distance away from being the big boss, but carving out a place for himself amid the many moving parts. But Ben has always preferred to poke around in the mechanics of things. He likes rolling up his sleeves and sticking his hands into the guts of a project, seeing if any sparks can be made from touching two wires together, and trying again and again until something exciting happens. He has a reverent patience for these things that Matt's never shared. Matt was sure that if he ever had to direct a whole movie he'd get so frustrated after one hour of everything going wrong that he'd end up just calling Ben to take over, anyway.

It took a few days for them to fall into a rhythm — "It took a few days for you to start respecting me, you mean," Ben would say later, and, like, yeah, kind of — as they navigated the change in dynamic. Acting opposite each other was nothing, an old trick they could both do in their sleep, but now, Ben was less likely to fuck around with him between takes. There'd been a learning curve as Matt gradually came to understand that after every scene they shared Ben's job was to dart behind the camera and re-emerge with notes on Matt's performance. The first time it happened, the flare of annoyance was swiftly overtaken by the swoop of his stomach, as if his body was finally catching up to what his brain logically already knew: *Oh, this is happening. He's in charge now*. There was giddy excitement in that, too. How strange, how electrifying, to discover there was still uncharted territory to be found in a decades-old relationship.

On a warm evening toward the middle of the shoot, Ben called cut and ducked into the shot to give him a note before seeming to think better of it and wrapping his hands around Matt's wrists, bodily rearranging his posture into a self-conscious slouch. Matt, laughing in surprise as Ben clutched his shoulders, looked toward Bateman, who

sat watching them with placid disinterest. After several prolonged seconds of that, Ben stepped back, eyeing Matt up and down a couple of times before nodding and turning away to convene with the camera operator.

“First time I agree to let him direct me and he makes me look like a total schlub,” Matt joked, feeling embarrassedly, pleasantly warm.

Bateman appeared only mildly entertained as he leaned back in his seat. “If this is how a schlub gets treated, sign me up to play a schlub in his next thing.”

The remark didn’t really process until after it was much too late to respond, hitting him only after he’d shed the beeper and the polo and gone home for the night. It would pop into his mind at random moments in the succeeding weeks, like when Ben, wearing that ridiculous wig, abruptly leaned across the desk during a scene to tilt Matt’s chin down just so; or when Ben stopped him on their walk to set to mess with the tuck of Sonny’s shirt; or when Ben sidled into frame to lean a friendly hand on Marlon’s shoulder, whispering something in his ear while holding searing eye contact with Matt. It took his breath away; it tired him the fuck out. More often than not, he came home pleasantly loose-limbed and bleary-eyed, feeling like he’d spent the day training like he used to for *Bourne* rather than what he was actually doing — which was, for the most part, just sitting in chairs.

“He takes good care of you,” Lucy said one evening. She’d visited set that day and they’d driven home together, Matt dozing in the passenger’s seat as they idled in traffic.

Matt snorted a little, cracking an eye open to look at her disbelievingly. “He takes *care* of me?”

“Yes,” she laughed, swatting lightly at his thigh. He intercepted, catching her hand and lifting it to his mouth, pressing kisses to her knuckles. “He does. He fusses over you, but it’s sweet to watch. I wondered how it would work with him directing. Like, if you guys would be different.”

Matt lowered her hand from his lips, threading their fingers together and resting them in his lap. “And, what, you think we are?”

“A little,” she said. “It’s hard to describe. He winds you up and then brings you back down all in one day.” She threw him an amused glance and added, “Saves me a lot of time.”

He forced a laugh. He felt, quite suddenly, wide awake. “You’re *hilarious*,” he said instead of any of the thoughts that were swirling around his mind, and it made her laugh too, and that was it.

*

Paps had lurked near the set in droves at the beginning, but largely disappeared when they realized Matt and Ben weren’t going to give them much. Matt was not what could be called a tabloid fixture — his day to day life was, famously, pretty boring — and he had enough sense to know that the novelty of the pair of them sipping Diet Cokes between takes wore off after a day or two.

It was how Matt immediately knew there was something off when he arrived one morning to find a swarm of photographers parked across the street, their cameras poised and ready like the president was in town. And, in many ways, she was.

Matt took his time in makeup, replying half-heartedly to emails and making idle conversation with Luisa as she dusted his forehead with setting powder. He asked, as if he didn’t already know, not even sure what type of response he was looking for, *Jen’s here, huh?* Luisa replied, *Yeah, but I’ve barely seen her*, and then she laughed and added, *TJ said she and Ben have been glued at the hip. It’s cute*. They’d known each other long enough that Matt declined to say anything else that might give him away, just smiled tightly and quickly let his face droop back into neutrality when she started complaining about creases.

He found them giggling outside Ben’s trailer, Jen tucked under Ben’s arm while Ben puffed on a cigarette, diligently blowing the smoke away from her. (If it had been Matt with him, Ben would have blown it right in his face; Matt had quit fifteen years ago at Lucy’s behest and still fantasized every day about the taste, and Ben loved nothing more than to get a juvenile little taunt in where he could.) Jen saw him approaching first, her hawkish gaze meeting his own over Ben’s shoulder, her smile dazzling and guarded as they took each other in. She said something to Ben that Matt wasn’t close enough to hear and he turned, his face lighting up.

“The diva has arrived, everybody, we can start now,” Ben called to the cluster of assistants and grips buzzing around nearby.

Matt made a face, shoving his hands in the pockets of Sonny's slacks. "I've been here for, like, two hours."

"All two of which were spent in the makeup chair," Ben said. "No, man, I get it. You were feeling too pretty today and needed to get ug-ed up. Well, too bad, you're still gorgeous."

Matt started to laugh before abruptly cutting himself off, suddenly aware of his pudgy stomach, of the lines that had been exaggerated under his eyes. His gaze slid masochistically to Jen, taking in her freshly styled hair, her dewy complexion, the tanned skin exposed by the three undone buttons at the collar of her crisp white shirt. The rock glittering on her ring finger. Even silent, she effortlessly drew the eye. It was like being in the presence of a person who glowed from within.

Ben blew a plume of smoke directly into his eyes, dragging Matt's attention back to him.

"Thank you so much," Matt deadpanned, waving a hand in front of his face. "Can you tell that to Lucy?"

"Lucy thinks I made him look like shit," Ben stage-whispered to Jen, leaning into her as she grinned, nuzzling his nose against her ear. Half-buried against the side of her face, he kept one eye trained on Matt. "Maybe I did. Maybe I was a little jealous."

Matt frowned. He could only imagine how their display must have appeared to the photographers snapping away from their vantage point: Ben and Jen laughing radiantly while Matt, looking the most middle-aged anyone has ever looked, ruined their photos with his grimace.

"No, you really do look perfect," Ben said, taking one more drag of his cigarette before stubbing the butt out under his shoe. He wasn't in any scenes that day and was obviously luxuriating in it, his beard unkempt, his bleach stained t-shirt tight where it stretched across his chest. Matt was always surprised when Jen let him out of the house like that — disheveled, normal — but felt grateful for it whenever it happened. For one stupid second, all he saw was Ben at twenty-five, handsome and cocksure and unabashedly fratty, and all the more alluring for it.

Matt blinked. Without him noticing, the sun beating down on them had become oppressively hot. "Sorry, hi, Jen," he said, leaning in to give her a dry kiss on the cheek, in a move that only struck him as

belated and awkward only after he pulled away. For her part, she looked unruffled.

“Hi, baby,” she said in her honeyed tone. She untangled herself from Ben, patting him on the bicep, and said, with the conspiratorial smile of someone who was sharing in an inside joke, “I’ll give him back to you now.”

Matt faked a laugh. “And I’ll return him in full working condition.”

Ben, evidently not listening to a word of this, chose that moment to run his fingers through Matt’s hair, mussing up and tugging at the strands. Matt jerked backward in alarm, caught between humiliation and an involuntary surge of pleasure, but Ben was too busy looking at him with the appraising squint of an artist to notice.

“*Too* perfect,” Ben said, letting his hand fall away and nodding at Matt’s now-tousled hair. A small crowd of crew members had gathered behind them, waiting impatiently for the director to come back down to Earth, to stop grinning impishly at his lead actor. “There’s my star.”

Matt’s eyes snapped to Jen, who stared back at him evenly. To his own credit, he held her gaze until one of the assistants came to escort him to his mark.

*

“I always think about this story PT Anderson told about Phil Hoffman,” Ben says in response to a rambling question from their interviewer, who Matt has been informed is not, in fact, a journalist, but someone with a large TikTok following. He’d surreptitiously texted Isabella to ask if she knew who the woman was and has yet to receive a reply, as is often the case these days — fucking teenagers.

Matt adjusts in his seat, his interest stirred by this, another line he hasn’t heard before. Their knees bump together; Ben’s legs are spread wide for no reason Matt can deduce.

“It was before they’d met, you know, and he saw Phil in *Scent of a Woman*, and he said he instantly knew what true love was,” Ben says with earnest passion, his hands sweeping through the air. “I remember his exact words were, ‘He’s for me and I’m for him.’ And I remember it

because it just sounded so romantic." Ben's eyes widen a bit, like he's bowling himself over with what he's saying. In Matt's periphery, he sees the TikTok woman lean forward, apparently as eager as he is to find out where Ben's going with this. An irrational part of him is furious that Ben would just give this moment away to her, to some nobody. He wants her and everyone behind the cameras to leave. He wants Ben to keep talking for only Matt to hear. "And he talked about casting him in *Hard Eight*, writing him this role that was basically just another one of the, like, obnoxious asshole characters Phil had gotten pigeonholed into playing at that time, right? But then Paul was like, 'I don't feel bad, because we'll make it the best version of that.' I mean, I'm paraphrasing now, but you get it."

Ben clears his throat, glancing so briefly at Matt he doesn't even have time to search his eyes. "So, yeah, that's kind of how it felt working with Matt in this new context. Making it the best version of everything we've done before. Falling in love with him all over again, so to speak."

The woman looks to Matt expectantly, wearing the illuminated expression of someone who knows they just got the money soundbite. For a second, Matt can't find his voice.

"Well, that's really nice of Ben to say," he eventually manages, his hands flexing where they rest on his thighs. "I guess I was mostly in it for the free Jordans."

The line lands perfectly, like he knew it would. The interviewer moves on, satisfied with their answers, and Matt resolutely ignores the weight of Ben's inscrutable gaze on him, happy to move on, too.

*

The third time Ben went to rehab, Matt found out from, of all things, a text from his brother. He'd been feeding the cat when his phone buzzed with a link from Kyle to an Us Weekly article — *Jennifer Garner Drives Ex-Husband Ben Affleck to Rehab*, read the screaming headline — followed by a question mark, like Matt was in any position to give clarity. Barely a minute later, his phone began blowing up with similar messages from other family members and friends of friends and industry people who had, somehow, gotten Matt's number. It almost struck Matt as funny: When you can't reach

Ben's main wife, try the back-up.

"I really am sorry, Matt," Jennifer told him later, a sigh in her voice. He'd been trying her on and off for hours, had spoken briefly to her assistant, who assured Matt that she would call him back as soon as she could. It wasn't until she finally did that the crushing sense of guilt hit him all at once. He answered with his tail between his legs, chagrined and anxious and, despite himself, incandescently angry.

"No, no, I'm — I'm sorry," he said, rubbing a hand through his hair. It was after midnight; Lucy and the girls had all gone to bed, but Matt was sitting up half-watching Colbert and chewing on his nails, startling every time his phone lit up. "I was just, I mean…" He trailed off. He didn't know what he was. "What did you tell the kids?"

"I told them Daddy's sick again and is going away to get better." She paused for one heavy, drawn out moment. "I don't know how much longer that's going to work, you know? They're getting older. They see things. They're asking more questions."

Matt felt a throbbing ache, right in the center of his chest. "How is—" He stopped, mortified that he'd let such a rudimentary question slip out. How many years had they all been doing this dance, and he still had no idea how to talk about it? Deciding that facts were safest, he corrected himself: "How long is he there for?"

In a tone like she was reading a prepared statement to the press, Jen said, "He'll be there forty days. He'll be detoxing for a bit and will have restricted access to his phone for the first couple of weeks." Like an extra twist of the knife, she went on, "I'm sure he'd love to hear from you when he's feeling better."

"Jen," he said weakly. They'd never been close, no, but he had to believe they'd been in each other's lives for long enough that they could drop the pretenses in desperate times. The questions he really wanted to ask — *why did no one call me, why did I have to find out like a member of the fucking B team, do you seriously think I couldn't see how bad it was getting* — seemed too insensitive to say aloud. "Come on. Please."

They listened to each other breathe for a long stretch and he thought, wildly, about the fight he and Ben had gotten into after his and Jen's wedding, which Matt had not been invited to.

Dude, you haven't exactly been hiding the fact that you fucking hate her, Ben said, and Matt knew what was coming next before the words even

left his mouth, the unspoken elephant in every room they'd ever stood in together since Ben got his first kiss from Rebecca Donovan in the fall of '81, *You've been a relentless asshole to every single person I've ever been with, do you realize that?* He'd been waiting for Ben to come right out and say it for most of their lives and yet when the moment arrived he was thoroughly unprepared, left stammering some flimsy approximation of a defense: *That's bullshit, I like Jen a lot. You know I like Jen. You know that's not fucking true.* And then the worst thing had happened, which is that Ben stopped yelling, just looked at Matt sadly, his eyes taking on that kicked dog quality they got when his feelings were really, actually hurt. Matt had seen them deployed plenty, but never in his direction. It was, he imagined, akin to an arrow to the chest. *Okay, man*, Ben said. *Sure.*

After a while, Jen inhaled. She said, finally, "You know what he made me do before I dropped him off?"

Matt was at a loss, and then, as if a light bulb had turned on his head: "I'm guessing," he said, unable to help the small, knowing laugh bubbling in his throat, "he made you stop and get him a fucking burger and fries."

"*Begged* me," she said, a ghost of a laugh in her voice, too. "So I stopped at Jack in the Box because it was on the way, and, you know, the sober coach was with us, and she was like, 'Um, isn't this kind of time sensitive? Isn't he *drunk* back there?'"

"It would've been so much worse if you hadn't gotten it for him," Matt said, remembering the thousands of times he and Ben, both equally intoxicated, made similar fast food runs. It was how they'd spent much of their last summer together before Matt left for Harvard — greasy, fumbling fingers and stale breaths, passing cigarettes back and forth between bites. He remembered the summer before that, when Ben came back from that program his mom had insisted on sending him to — *A camp for alcoholic kids, can you fucking believe it?* Ben had drunkenly laughed, cracking open another Bud Light; *Not a bad idea for a movie*, Matt, also drunk, mused, which made Ben's jaw drop — and how absurd it all seemed at the time. What no one seemed to understand is that Ben couldn't possibly have a problem because Matt didn't have a problem. No other alternative made sense for two people who shared everything. To act as if anything else was true was to go against the laws of the universe.

"That's what I said." A beat. "I need to get some sleep, but you really should call him soon. I'll text you the number." They both quieted,

like they were waiting for the other to say something that would make all of this better, until Jen eventually said, “He did ask me to call you. Right before they took him in.” And weirdly, that didn’t help very much at all.

He did end up going to see Ben the next week, the pair of them huddled around a small round table out on the facility’s luxuriously sun-drenched terrace. These places always felt more like spas than rehab centers to Matt. Even so, in the days leading up to his visit, he’d been kept awake nights by visions of a sunken-eyed and sallow Ben, bloated and miserable and unresponsive, but the reality was far less harrowing. There were pronounced dark shadows under Ben’s bloodshot eyes, and his beard was reaching mountain man territory (“Shaving is a group activity here,” he’d muttered, rubbing a hand over his scruffy cheek), but he looked a little thinner, a little clearer. He wore the contrite disposition of someone who just realized they’d recently blacked out and brought a 22-year-old Playmate to a child’s soccer game.

“They have this approved list of movies we’re allowed to watch,” Ben said, picking at a cuticle. “Nothing too stressful, nothing too stupid. So nothing of mine, obviously, but you know what I *have* been watching a lot of?”

“*Girl, Interrupted*,” Matt deadpanned.

“So close,” Ben said. “The *Ocean’s* movies, baby. When Case called the other day I told him all about how adorable he used to be and then he hung up on me, which I thought was rude. How could you hang up on someone in rehab?”

“Oh, I’m starting to see how.”

“But no one’s more adorable than you, Matty.”

“Can you shut the fuck up,” Matt said, which made Ben smile.

They were talking around it, he recognized. But Ben was in good spirits and Matt was trying to be in good spirits because Ben was, and what more was there to say, really? Matt’s schedule on the Ferrari thing had kept him away from the worst of this bender, but the worrying tabloid behavior coupled with Ben’s sporadic texts and calls at obscure hours were enough to pique Matt’s curiosity. The issue, always, was that Ben never learned to control his shit like everyone else their age who used to party like crazy, but Matt wasn’t exactly supposed to say that. He’d learned his lesson when Ben went to rehab

the first time, back in '01: *You're not a fucking alcoholic, you're just bored and single*, Matt had laughed, and it was enough to piss Ben off so bad that he stormed out of Matt's house and didn't speak to him for weeks. In the subsequent years, they spoke of the alcohol thing only sporadically and casually, like it was one of their shitass Cambridge friends. It suited Matt fine; to think about it was to acknowledge Ben's descent into a place Matt couldn't reach him, which was the scariest thought in the world.

After a couple of hours of talking about nothing at all, right before Matt was about to leave, Ben rubbed a hand over his jaw in that way he did when he wanted to say something important but was afraid of how Matt would react.

Matt, who had first seen this look in the fifth grade when Ben told him he'd lost Matt's favorite Sox hat, nudged his leg under the table with his foot. "What?" When Ben didn't respond, he nudged him harder. "What could you possibly have done? You're literally in rehab."

"I didn't do shit," Ben said, kicking back. "I just — you know who sent me an email? It's not a big deal, but — Jen." Off Matt's look, he quickly added, "No, the other one."

"Okay," Matt said slowly, his brow furrowing. One of the soft-spoken attendants had begun bustling around the room, informing people that visiting hours were over. "So? Don't you guys keep in touch?" Ben just shrugged, and Matt stared, mystified. He felt like he'd missed some key part of the conversation. "Why are we talking about this?"

Ben shrugged again, rising from his seat, a complicated look crossing his features before he slid back into geniality. "I don't know," he said, pulling Matt into a loose, single-armed hug, patting him on the back — once, twice. "Never mind, man. I'm tired, I'm just saying whatever."

Before he could prod at that, the attendant came over to politely shoo Matt in the direction of the exit. When Ben was released four weeks later, Matt had forgotten about the conversation entirely.

*

During the halcyon days of the strike, he and Cillian meet for a

meandering lunch that turns into a meandering dinner, because they don't have much else to do. For Matt, it's a bit like being on an extended summer vacation. For Cillian, he's getting antsier the longer he's forced to stay in LA. He'd shown up grumbling about the parking situation, which from Matt's view means he's officially becoming a local — a comment that starts up a brand new round of grumbling before drinks can even be ordered. And still, Matt prefers him like this to how he'd been during filming, with those sunken, searching eyes set against a malnourished frame.

"That's kind of you," Cillian says tonelessly, sipping his gin and tonic. They've relocated to the bar after dinner, which is quiet enough on this random weeknight that they can talk shit in relative peace without being bothered. Cillian's fun to gossip with because he loves to say *oh, wow* over and over in an almost pearl-clutching way before delivering such a dryly bitchy aside that you might miss it if you're not listening for it. It delights Matt, who, deep down, will always be a shameless rumormonger.

Matt's in the middle of relaying a story about a certain Ozempic-abusing actress getting explosive diarrhea on set ("Oh, wow," Cillian says, "It's interesting — in my experience, just going to the gym generally doesn't give you diarrhea") when his attention is caught by one of the TVs mounted on the wall behind the bar. He's been at this long enough that he's mostly become desensitized to seeing his friends on television, but becoming desensitized to Ben would involve cauterizing some important part of his brain.

It's Extra or Access Hollywood or one of those other insipid celebrity news shows, running a story about Ben and Jen's anniversary. Photos from Jen's Instagram flash across the screen, lingering on one of them jubilantly kissing, above a chyron that proclaims *JENNIFER LOPEZ SHARES SWEET PHOTOS ON ONE-YEAR WEDDING ANNIVERSARY WITH BEN AFFLECK*. He'd actually been invited to that one, had been tapped to share best man duties with Casey, until Casey, in yet another example of his extremely normal way of behaving, decided to bail at the last minute. *Yeah why do u think I'm home with my kid*, Casey replied when Matt texted him a photo from the reception, of the unbearably tacky 'Mr. & Mrs. Affleck' neon sign perched in an elaborate patch of greenery. Matt couldn't resist shooting back, *You mean your girlfriend?* which had gotten his number blocked for months, and the most annoying thing about that was that he couldn't tell Ben why, even though he probably would've found it really funny.

"Oh, wow," says Cillian, having followed Matt's gaze to the TV, which

he watched with a slightly furrowed brow. “One year, really? But it’s a bit off, isn’t it?” Cillian waves the dismissive hand of someone who’d gotten married twenty years ago inside a Catholic church. “They did the Vegas thing first, I thought.”

“Yeah, but you know Jen,” Matt mutters, and then, glancing away from the highlight reel, “Wait, *do* you know Jen?”

“Not intimately,” Cillian says demurely. “I mean, not as well as you.” It strikes Matt as such a profoundly strange thing to say that he can’t help his incredulous burst of laughter. Cillian laughs too, raising an eyebrow. “No?”

Matt’s laughter peters out, leaving him at a loss. “We’re, you know. Friendly.” Realizing how it sounds, he’s quick to add, “Obviously I know her — obviously I’ve *known* her for a long time. And she and Ben have been through a lot together.” He hears himself sliding into grating publicist speak and can tell from the look on Cillian’s face that he hears it, too. Matt’s quiet for a beat, and then, feeling chastened, adds, “To tell you the truth, I don’t know if I could tell you a single fucking thing about her.” He thinks about it as hard as he can, scouring the depths of his mind for even one single fact. Another inappropriate laugh tickles at his throat. “I don’t even know her birthday,” he says, a dark mood beginning to brew, even as he tittered. “That’s weird. Like, to know someone for twenty years and not know their birthday? That shouldn’t happen.”

Cillian fixes Matt with one of his penetrating stares. He remembers the way Krumholtz had once described Cillian’s eyes: gentle but cruel.

Matt squirms under the weight of all that blue, feeling horrifically old. Too old for whatever this is. “What?”

Cillian lowers his gaze, shrugging. “No, nothing.” He seems to remember there’s a drink in front of him that can easily be used as a distraction, lifting it to his lips. Matt waits him out, vibrating impatiently. “If there’s something you want to say you should probably just say it, man. It’ll kill you otherwise.”

“I don’t have anything to say to you,” Matt says, trying to tease and coming out sounding churlish.

“Not to *me*,” Cillian says, unoffended and far too pointed. Then, his eyes skate away, back toward the TV, and a wry smile splits across his face. “Oh, wow.”

When Matt looks up, he's met with the sight of a grainy paparazzi photo of himself at the wedding, unsmiling in Tom Ford at Ben's side, blown up on the screen. His heart, lodged in his throat, thumps pathetically.

"Oh, wow," he agrees, passionless.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> matt's absolutely crazy 2004 playboy interview, which inspired this interlude, is a must-read

Summer 1986

Here's a story they never tell:

Matt had spent the better part of his sophomore year of high school focusing on the drama club, trying to establish a reputation for himself as someone who took acting seriously and was not, in fact, only there to meet girls. He'd been hopeful when *Pippin* was announced as the summer musical; he could sing, and he was pretty sure he was more talented than any of the other guys in the club. And yet, despite an improbably intense audition process, Matt had not gotten the titular role in *Pippin*. (That intensity, Ben said, was his problem: "You want it too bad, dude," he crowed, kicking his feet up on Matt's mom's coffee table. "Nobody likes desperation." In response, Matt pushed him so hard off the couch that he ended up breaking one of the table's legs.) No, the teacher explained, Matt was a much better fit for Lewis, Pippin's vain, dimwitted little shit of a half-brother. Matt could take a hint: Nobody got cast as the annoying side character to end annoying side characters because someone thought they had untapped star potential. But at least he had lines. That had to count for something. It was more than Ben's tone deaf ass had gotten.

"Tone deaf and *proud*," said Ben, too smug for someone who was going to be spending his summer memorizing lighting cues and lugging around set pieces. The five-inch growth spurt he'd enjoyed over the past few months, coupled with his recent stint on the basketball team, made him well-suited for lifting large equipment with ease and, simultaneously, so fucking infuriating to Matt, who was beginning to fear he was doomed to come up around Ben's shoulder for the rest of their lives.

Rehearsals were every other weekday, beginning in the afternoon and ending in the early evening, because no one, least of all their teacher, wanted to wake up at the asscrack of dawn in the middle of sweltering July. They all dedicated a few hours of their days to learning footwork and practicing harmonies and painting sets before collectively spilling out into the high school's parking lot, arguing about whose turn it was

to beg their older sibling or dirtbag cousin to buy beer. Thankfully, Matt, whose brother was older but not *that* much older, and Ben, whose brother was basically still in diapers as far as they were concerned, were exempt from these conversations. Sometimes, because he had manners, Matt threw in a few bills from the grocery money his mom had left him and Kyle for the month, but only if the girl buying was particularly cute. Otherwise, he was more than content to mooch wherever he could.

On a Friday night, after Matt had spent two maddening hours starting and restarting the finale number because Pete Murphy, their Pippin, had fucked up his voice and sounded like dogshit as a result (he shouldn't have even gotten the part in the first place, but whatever), Ben turned to him with grave sincerity as they embarked on the short walk from the school to Matt's house.

"Dude, seriously, don't let me stay out late tonight," he said. "My mom's been on my ass. Casey's such a fucking snitch — he heard me coming in at like, three or four or whenever the other night and ratted."

"I don't see how I'm in control of that," Matt said, shrugging a shoulder innocently.

Ben gave him a look. "Don't be a dick."

"You're in fucking *Pippin*, it's not like you're in a gang or out robbing banks or whatever," Matt said, squinting out at the waning sun ahead of them, setting languidly over the tops of the houses lining the block, drenching everything in orange and pink. In reality, Matt and Ben hadn't even been with the rest of the company on the night Ben had gotten in trouble — they'd been busy excavating Kyle's porn stash and splitting a dusty bottle of whiskey they'd uncovered from the depths of a cupboard, forgotten by Matt's mom years ago.

"Drama club's kind of like a gang," Ben said, thoughtful. "Like a really faggy gang." When Matt elbowed him in the ribs, he laughed and amended, "But the only one of those faggy dorks I'd wanna rob a bank with is you."

"Thanks," Matt said in a flat tone. A stab of irritation he couldn't account for rushed over him, making him want to shove Ben again, a little harder this time. He held back the urge, tucking his hands into his pockets.

Ben slanted a glance at him. "Are you mad? Don't be mad, I'll still

help you talk to Julie."

Matt wrinkled his nose. "I don't need your help talking to Julie, I can talk to Julie on my own."

Ben's eyebrows shot up annoyingly. "Oh, yeah? Then why haven't you?"

Matt sighed. It was complicated, something Ben knew, so he resented him playing dumb. He'd been carefully nursing a crush on Julie Romano since she'd moved into the house across the street when he was twelve, and had just as carefully made the decision to never do anything about it. Julie was a good friend; he could talk to her the way he couldn't talk to other girls, could laugh with her the way he laughed with Ben. If sometimes he caught himself staring for a little too long at the swell of her ass under her skirts, well — that was just a natural part of being friends with girls, he figured. And if sometimes, when they were paired together during a dance number, he swore he saw Julie checking him out right back, he figured that was just part of it, too. It was pointless to risk the friendship they'd developed over the high probability of rejection, which would be all the more humiliating because Matt was, piteously, still a virgin.

Ben absolutely refused to stop calling him a pussy over the Julie thing, but Ben was fucking fourteen and had no business commenting on anything Matt did, ever.

"She has a boyfriend," Matt said.

"They broke up like two months ago, which I know you didn't just conveniently forget," Ben said. "Try again."

"She's not even coming tonight," Matt said, not knowing whether that was remotely true. When Ben started to say something that sounded a whole lot like *not true, asshole*, Matt decided he'd had enough and broke into a jog the rest of the way home. He thought about locking the front door behind him but knew that Ben would probably retaliate by throwing rocks at his window until the glass chipped, which he didn't want to have to explain. He made a beeline for the fridge and swiped a slice of leftover pizza, hopping up on the counter while he waited for Ben to come banging in behind him. Kyle wasn't home, because Kyle was never home, because Kyle was, mercifully, the worst babysitter of all time. Matt had never loved his brother as much as he did that summer.

"You can seal the deal with her, man," Ben called a moment or two

later, his disembodied voice echoing through the empty house.

“Kitchen,” Matt called, making sure he was scowling when Ben’s head popped around the corner.

“I don’t understand why you’re so weird about girls when they *like* you and would *very happily* fuck you,” Ben said, coming to lean beside him. Matt clocked his socked feet; he’d taken his sneakers off at the door, even though Matt’s mom wasn’t there to scold him. “Stop acting like you’re not hot. You’re fucking hot.”

There it was again — that spiky glimmer of inexplicable ire. It made Matt’s frown deepen. “Hey, you know what you could do? Mind your business.”

Ben grinned, a big, toothy thing. He twisted his body gracelessly into Matt’s space, his hip bones pushing against Matt’s knees, and leaned in until their noses bumped together. The harsh overhead kitchen light made his eyes look brown from far away, but this close, Matt saw clearly the flecks of green in his irises. Matt's breath stuttered, his mouth falling open against his will. And then Ben took a huge, obnoxious bite from the slice of pizza Matt had completely forgotten he’d been holding and swiftly reeled back, giggling.

“This is why girls *don’t* like you,” Matt snapped, his voice sounding ragged in his own ears. His pulse was, stupidly, still racing. He shoved the remains of the crust into Ben’s hands and, for good measure, wiped the crumbs on his shirt. “I’m gonna shower. You ass.”

“Wash off that attitude, maybe,” Ben suggested, and Matt very kindly elected not to tell him he sounded just like his mother.

He didn’t feel much better after his shower, but he didn’t want to deal with the round of jeering he’d be subjected to from Ben if he didn’t make an appearance at the post-rehearsal party. Their friend Mike was hosting that night; he was reluctantly stage managing *Pippin* because his girlfriend was playing Fastrada and had begged him to join the crew to spend more time with her. He was a remarkably terrible stage manager, but he lived in a massive house with a sprawling basement and his parents were rarely around, which made up for it.

Someone, Matt didn’t know who, had found a 21-year-old to procure the beer, which was almost halfway gone by the time he and Ben arrived. They separated fairly quickly, Ben sauntering over to where a small group was congregated near the boombox while Matt drifted over to the oversized desk being used as a makeshift bar to grab

himself a drink. They'd barely spoken on the walk to Mike's, a strange tension thrumming between them that Matt didn't care to examine too closely. He'd rather do this: ignore Ben while moving around the party by himself, insert himself into random conversations, smoke someone else's weed, and at one point become so enthralled by the gnarly defibrillator scene from *The Thing*, a tape of which was playing on the television in the corner, that all he could do was sit and watch.

Matt was usually better at parties than this. Matt was usually better than this, period. It was supposed to be a good summer, the best of his life, maybe — his mom was in Mexico, and had immense trust in him and Kyle to not get arrested or accidentally kill themselves, meaning that he was about as free as he'd ever been. He should've been spending his time in more productive ways than getting tipsy off one and a half beers and moping in front of his friend's parents' TV. He couldn't understand or predict what provoked these dips in his mood, or why they always left him feeling so melancholy when things were, by all accounts, going well. He'd asked his mom about it once, the torrential emotional storms that threatened to consume him, and she'd reminded him of the tantrums he used to throw as a kid. Those frequent, galactic shitfits over nothing, which his parents typically left him to scream out on his own.

"I think sometimes you just get so worked up trying to hide how you're feeling, honey," she'd told him, stroking his hair. "But expressing yourself can be a good thing. It can be good to feel what you're feeling in the moment."

He hadn't really known what that meant. He still didn't, honestly. It crossed his mind when he lurched over to the dwindling beer supply, swiping a can of Miller High Life that he cracked open just in time for someone to sidle up beside him and jostle his arm, making him spill half of the lukewarm liquid down his front.

"Oh my god," Julie gasped, her hands flying to his chest clumsily. "I'm so sorry!"

"That's okay," Matt said, a blush heating his face as beer began to drip steadily down his stomach and right into the waistband of his jeans. He half-heartedly attempted to wipe at the stain sinking slowly into his t-shirt, but it proved useless with nothing else to absorb it. "Hey, if no one can find a legal adult next week we can always take turns wringing out my shirt."

Julie laughed, looking sheepish. Her dark hair was pulled off her face

into a ponytail, a denim jacket draped over her shoulders. She really was so pretty, he thought lamely. “I really am sorry. I just wanted to say hi. I hadn’t seen you yet, I thought you might’ve left.”

“Yeah, I’ve been—” He jutted his chin toward the TV, where Kurt Russell was blowing up the research station, and then shook his head, deciding he didn’t actually want to explain why he’d been parked in front of a screen all night like a loser. “But — sorry, whatever, hi. How are you?”

Her responding smile was warm. “I’m good. I mean, I was good before I ruined your shirt.”

Matt glanced down at himself, his shirt now clinging uncomfortably to his torso. “At least it was ruined by the champagne of beers. Classy way for my shirt to go.”

Julie was still smiling, but something in her face shifted, almost imperceptibly. Matt was trying to work out what had changed when she spoke again, her voice a little softer: “I bet Mike has shirts upstairs that he won’t miss. I could help you look for one.”

Clueing in all at once, Matt’s heart kicked into overdrive. He was drunker than he realized, his eyes fixing on the gold cross necklace dangling between her collarbones, the delicate pendant resting just above the shadow of her cleavage. He understood in a sort of distant way that this could be *the moment*, but when he thought about following her upstairs he was instead gripped with the unmistakable impulse to run.

“Uh,” he said.

He tore his gaze away from Julie’s neck, feeling hunted, and turned his head until he located Ben across the room. Ben, who was obviously having a good time, laughing and chatting and wearing one of Matt’s t-shirts that he’d swiped before they left. It was just a little too short on him, exposing a pale sliver of skin every time he moved. A girl Matt didn’t recognize was plastered to his side. He knew exactly what Ben would say if he heard Matt hesitating: *Stop being such a pussy and eat her fucking pussy!*

As if he’d picked up on the *save me* pleas Matt was trying to psychically beam into his brain, Ben looked up, his eyes bright when they met Matt’s, looking so pleased to see him it was momentarily disarming.

“Sorry, I told Ben I’d get him home before curfew,” he said, his mouth running on autopilot.

Julie couldn’t hide her surprise, her eyebrows raising. “Oh. Okay? Will you — are you gonna come back after?”

“Maybe,” he called over his shoulder, already halfway to the pool table where Ben was holding court, presiding over a slapdash game between Mike and Pete.

“Matty!” Mike hooted drunkenly. “I’m losing!”

“He’s really fucking losing,” Ben agreed. He appraised Matt with a bemused look, eyes lingering on his wet shirt. “I have so many questions.”

“You have to go home,” Matt blurted out. “You said. Because of Casey.”

“Okay, Your Drunkesty, let’s maybe sit down for a sec,” Ben said, disentangling from the girl he hadn’t introduced Matt to so he could grip Matt’s shoulders in both hands, shaking him a little. “Did you blow it with Julie? Is that what I just saw happen over there?”

Matt shrugged out of his grasp and gestured toward the stairs. “Can we go? I want to go.” His throat felt weird, his vision blurry. He blinked hard against it, trying to just focus on Ben. “I’m gonna go.”

Slow comprehension began to dawn on Ben’s face. He nodded, taking hold of Matt’s shoulders again, this time so he could push him backwards. Without a word to anyone else, he steered them up the stairs and out of the house, paying no mind to the couple practically dry humping on Mike’s dad’s leather armchair. It wasn’t until they’d spilled out onto the lawn that Matt realized he was still holding his beer, which he presented mutely to Ben, who threw it back in a few large gulps.

“Champagne of beers,” Ben said sagely, crumpling up the can and tossing it carelessly away into the street. He crossed his arms over his chest, looking at Matt impatiently.

“Sorry,” was all Matt could think to say. His heart rate was decreasing now, and the static in his head was gradually growing fainter, out here in the quiet humidity. No one else on Mike’s street was outside, all the other houses shut down for the evening. After a moment, Matt muttered, “You can go back in there if you want. Sorry.”

Ben scoffed, throwing an arm around Matt's neck and guiding him off the neatly trimmed grass. He led them back to Matt's house in silence, got him a glass of water once they were inside, and guided him into his bedroom. He flopped down on the pull-out couch they'd dragged from the basement into Matt's room a few weeks ago for the express purpose of sleepovers, after Ben had complained too many times about sleeping on the floor. The thing just barely fit, the arm bumping up against the foot of Matt's bed.

He blinked hard at Ben. They hadn't turned the light on, but the glow from the street lamps slanted in through the half-open blinds, casting odd shadows across Ben's face as he propped himself up on his elbow. His shirt — Matt's shirt — was riding up, bunching right around his belly button.

For lack of anything better to say, Matt asked, "Didn't you say you had to get home early?"

"Why is that the thing you're so stuck on tonight?"

"You sounded all pissy about it before."

"I wasn't *pissy*," Ben said dismissively. "Anyway, whatever, I'm in fucking *Pippin*, it's not like I'm in a gang or out robbing banks."

Matt couldn't help the smile that split across his face, which made Ben point a finger gun at him, satisfied. The tension somewhat broken, Matt took a long sip of water before sitting on the edge of his bed with a heavy sigh. He felt like a puppet whose strings had been twisted in tight knots and abruptly snapped, leaving him boneless and disoriented.

"What?" Ben asked, his voice soft.

Matt looked away from his face, roving down the length of him, stopping at where his bare feet were hanging off the edge of the couch. The house was impossibly quiet around them.

"I don't know," Matt said, shrugging. "I had too much beer and freaked out."

"Beer doesn't make you freak out," Ben said immediately.

Matt looked at him sharply. "What, are you a doctor?"

"Yes," Ben said. "I'm a doctor who graduated from medical school and

I'm telling you that beer has never made anybody in history freak out."

The logic of that didn't seem sound, but Matt was laughing too much to challenge him. "Who the hell gave you a medical degree?"

"Your mom," Ben said solemnly.

Matt flipped him the bird and then threw himself backwards on the bed, leaving his empty glass on the floor. "I fucked up with Julie," he finally admitted.

"I gathered that."

"I kind of ran out on her," he said, wincing at the memory of her startled expression. "What are the chances she forgets this ever happened and gives me another shot?"

"With that ugly mug? Zero to none, buddy."

Matt turned his head toward Ben, who stared back with a little smirk. He felt, suddenly, curious, like he'd found an unlocked door he'd never seen before. His gut swooped in trepidation, a warning he ignored as he turned the knob. "I heard I'm hot. I heard I'm too hot to be acting like I'm *not* hot."

If Ben was affected by that, he didn't show it. His smirk remained plastered on his face — if anything, he looked *more* amused than he had a moment ago. "And so humble." The air between them felt thick, Matt noticed in a removed sort of way.

Before Matt could think of a reply, Ben pushed himself into a seated position and, in one fluid motion, pulled his shirt — *Matt's* shirt — off, balling it up and tossing it on the floor. He laid back down in an unhurried recline, folding his arms behind his head, holding Matt's gaze the entire time.

"Your shirt's all wet," Ben said, quiet.

Matt touched the damp cotton, which, he realized, absolutely reeked. Without a word, he stood, yanking the offending garment over his head. Then, feeling dumber than he had a second ago, reached for the button on his jeans and let them fall from his hips, kicking them aside when they pooled at his ankles. Left only in his underwear, he sat gingerly back on the bed and said, needlessly, "Pants were wet, too."

“Totally,” Ben said, another little smirk playing at his lips as his eyes slipped shut.

Matt registered that with confusion and aggravation, wanting to spring forward and pry Ben’s eyes open himself. “Going to sleep?”

“Maybe,” was all Ben said as he shifted just so on the couch, the lean muscles in his arms twitching with the movement.

Matt curled his fingers into the comforter. “Who put *The Thing* on?”

“Hm?”

“*The Thing*,” Matt said, like that clarified anything. “Somebody put it on at Mike’s. Thought it might’ve been you.”

“*How long were you alone with that dog?* ” Ben demanded in his best Richard Masur. They’d snuck into *The Thing* together when it came out, feeling on top of the world and like they’d gotten away with murder, only to immediately admit wrongdoing to their moms when they both started having gory, debilitating nightmares. “Wasn’t me. Great movie, though.”

“Great movie,” Matt agreed. He bit his bottom lip. He felt breathless. “*Why don't we just… wait here for a little while… see what happens*?”

Whatever Ben heard in Matt’s voice got him to crack an eye open, peering at him in the darkness. He was still smiling. “Will you just get over here?”

Matt’s pulse was hammering loudly, making it hard to think. It was that empty-headedness that sent him clambering forward onto the pull-out, kneeling clumsily beside Ben, his knee brushing Ben’s thigh. His skin felt unbearably hot all over; for one nervous second he worried that Ben would burn when he touched him.

When.

When.

Ben’s legs parted, pushing his thigh more insistently against the bone of Matt’s knee. He reached out, resting a hand on Matt’s stomach, just above the waistband of his boxers. His fingers walked out a little pattern along the line of the elastic.

“I can show you,” said Ben, but he wasn’t looking at Matt. He was

looking, instead, at his hand in Matt's lap. Even in the darkness, Matt knew Ben could see him getting hard. "So when you do it with Julie, you won't freak out again."

"*I* should be showing *you*," Matt protested weakly. "I'm older."

"That doesn't mean anything," Ben murmured, his hand flattening over Matt's abs, thumb stroking the quivering muscles there. "Which one of us got a blowjob from Lisa Sims at that pool party?"

"Lisa Sims is a slut," Matt said, rolling his eyes. "She'll blow anybody."

"Not *anybody*," Ben teased, glancing up at Matt pointedly.

Matt rolled his eyes a second time. "Alright."

"Doesn't make any sense why she hasn't, though," Ben said, his voice pitched low, as if they were at risk of someone overhearing them. "Doesn't make sense why anyone hasn't. Look at you, man."

They'd never spoken to each other like that before. What was worse was how dizzyingly sincere Ben sounded about it, like it was something he really believed. Whatever humiliation Matt had been feeling about his tragic lack of experience was fading, replaced with the heady desire to find out what Ben knew, to learn from him, like they always learned from each other.

Matt swallowed. "Can I kiss you?"

"Yeah," Ben said, retracting his hand, which Matt mourned for a moment until he pushed himself up on his elbows and tilted his face up toward Matt, crowding him like he'd done earlier. He wondered if Ben had wanted Matt to kiss him then, too. He wondered if Ben had wanted Matt to kiss him all night.

"Matty," Ben said, nudging his nose against Matt's chin. "It's fine."

Better than fine, Matt thought as he crashed their mouths together inelegantly, his palms sliding up Ben's bare chest to cup his jaw in both hands, holding them both steady. There was no way to be slow and exploratory about it, which was how, in Matt's limited experience, girls liked to kiss. Instead, Ben met him with ungainly enthusiasm, his mouth wet and warm when Matt sucked on his upper lip, then his bottom lip, before opening to accommodate Matt's tongue. He jumped when Ben's fingers dug into his hip, and sighed when his thumb resumed its soothing stroking. They made out in an increasingly

frenzied way, riling each other up with every swipe of their tongues, every graze of teeth, and Matt was so hard he thought he might go blind, or deaf, or something.

When they eventually came up for air, they were both panting, beer breath mingling as Matt leaned his temple against Ben's. He was sweating from head to toe.

Ben ducked his head, trailing kisses down Matt's neck, lapping at the droplets of sweat. "You taste like Miller High Life," he whispered somewhere around Matt's left nipple, which he then sucked into his mouth.

The sensation in such a sensitive area was unlike anything Matt had ever experienced. He let out a moan, reaching up to rake his hands through Ben's hair. "Champagne of beers," he managed shakily, which made Ben huff out a gratifying laugh through his nose, his mouth still — impossibly — occupied. Matt scratched his fingers over his scalp, rubbed at his nape. "You do this with girls?"

"Mhm," Ben hummed, pulling back to lap gently at Matt's nipple. "Yeah, they fucking flip for it. Remember that when you have Julie's itty bitties in front of you."

Matt cuffed him on the back of the head for that, but it only made Ben snicker.

They'd always been good at communicating silently, and it seemed to be translating here, too. Like he read his mind, Ben popped up from his chest with a little grin, which he let Matt kiss sloppily away as he hooked an arm around Matt's waist and lowered him down on his back. The springs of the pullout dug uncomfortably into his spine, but it was minor compared to the overwhelming sight of Ben parting his legs so he could settle between them, their chests flush against each other as his body blanketed Matt's. The few inches he had on Matt, and the width of his shoulders, the divots of his abs, seemed especially pronounced now. Matt found, in this context, that it no longer pissed him off. He pressed a thumb into the hollow space under Ben's cheekbone and whimpered into Ben's mouth when he reached down to rub at his cock through the thin material of his boxers. He felt like he was seeing stars already, and Ben had just barely gotten a hand on him. The thick press of Ben's erection against his thigh, through the jeans he was for some reason still wearing, made him paw feverishly at the denim.

“Take those off,” Matt insisted.

Ben hummed, kissing Matt’s jaw. “You wanna feel me?”

“Yeah,” Matt said, breath hitching. “Please — yes. Right now.”

“Since you said *please*,” Ben said, climbing to his feet and making a show out of undoing the button and zipper, dragging his pants down his legs. The couch creaked in ominous protest against such a powerfully unsexy display, even with his boner tenting his boxers obscenely — and yet, Matt was powerless to how every ridiculous sway of Ben’s hips made his cock throb in confused arousal.

“My mom’s gonna kill you if you break this thing,” was all Matt could think to say, reaching up to push his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

“Thank you for making me think about your mom right now,” Ben said, finally lowering himself back down on top of Matt. When he straddled one of Matt’s thighs, fitting it perfectly between his own, their clothed dicks grazed, making them both groan. “Jesus fuck.”

Matt’s hips began to move of their own accord, grinding his erection relentlessly against Ben’s. He returned his fingers to Ben’s hair while Ben’s hand skittered across Matt’s thigh, silently encouraging him to wrap his leg around his waist. Matt moaned, liking that — liking the feeling of them wound around each other, the rough scrape of Ben’s leg hair against his, the way he had to stretch to meet Ben’s thrusts.

Ben’s mouth hung open wantonly when he pulled back to look at Matt, his eyes so dark now they almost looked black. “I want to touch your dick,” he said, sounding cautious, like he was afraid *that* was where Matt would draw the line.

“Do it,” Matt breathed.

“Yeah?” Ben murmured, leaning in to bite the point of Matt’s chin playfully. But he didn’t wait for Matt’s answer before he squeezed a hand between them and shoved it into his underwear, gripping his cock in his fist.

“*Fuck*,” Matt groaned, and then even louder, when Ben rubbed his thumb over the head, “*Ben*, fuck.”

“You like that,” Ben said, and it was less of a question than it was an awed statement of fact, but Matt ground out his answer anyway, “*Yes*,” as he bucked mindlessly into Ben’s hand. He barely had to do

anything, just the feel — just the unbelievable image in his head — of Ben's hand wrapped around him was enough. He buried his blazingly hot face against the bend of Ben's shoulder and cried out as he came, shamefully fast, his hips rutting erratically until he returned to his body.

"Holy shit," Ben exhaled, and promptly set about chasing his own orgasm, pulling his hand out of Matt's boxers so he could shove it down the front of his own, and even Matt's hazy brain acknowledged that it was only considerate to return the favor, that he didn't want to the night to end without finding out what the weight of Ben's cock felt like in his hand. He wedged an arm between them and palmed his way under Ben's waistband, gasping when their fingers knocked together as they both took hold of Ben's shaft. He felt his own come on Ben's skin as their fingers wound between each other, stroking up and down, breathing into each other's mouths as they jerked Ben off together. Ben kissed him just before he came, the hot spill over Matt's fist only second to the vibration of Ben's moan.

They sat like that for a long moment, wrapped up in each other and fighting to catch their breath as come dried on their groins. Ben was pressing slow kisses to his jaw but otherwise seemed done for, whining when Matt pushed at his side hard enough to make him roll away.

"God," Matt said, looking down at his destroyed boxers. They were wet and sticky; *he* was wet and sticky. He looked over at Ben, and panic settled in so fast it was as if it had always been there, as if he'd been born having a meltdown about the fact that his best friend had just made him come. He felt it mounting like it had before at the party, an anxious shiver cutting through him like a bolt of lightning.

"Uh," Matt started.

"So that's basically how you have to do it with Julie," Ben said loudly. He threw his arms over his head, stretching leisurely. "Nothing much to it. Except she, you know, has different equipment down there. But a smart guy like you, you'll figure it out."

It surprised a big laugh out of Matt, which made Ben smile as he gave him a half-lidded look, raising an eyebrow. What was it he'd said earlier? *Matty. It's fine.*

Maybe, just maybe, it actually was.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> references for this chapter: ben surprising matt at the golden globes, double date night, sisterwife lunch

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A few weeks after the movie wraps, Matt and Ben have a business meeting — an actual one, with paperwork and calendars and conference calls. They've been doing what their younger selves would have cluelessly referred to as "official shit" together for, at this point, most of their lives, but the company is a different beast, with so many moving parts and so many people relying on them and so very many documents. For his birthday, Matt had given Ben a hideous mug that read *CEO: CONQUER EVERY OBSTACLE* in big block letters, which he'd found buried in the depths of a kitschy shop that caught Gia's eye the last time they were wandering around Brooklyn. Ben likes sipping coffee out of it during these meetings, angling it pointedly in Matt's direction.

Today, they're formalizing plans for a real office space, a small spot in Beverly Hills that puts them in the vicinity of a dozen other production companies, which Matt thinks gives them the sense of legitimacy they've been lacking. Until now, they've mostly been meeting over Zoom or, when they're both in LA, in Ben's home office, ever since Matt issued a blanket ban on gathering in Ben's preferred location of his editing studio, because, despite his claims, *Ben* is the unforgivable slob of the two of them, and the areas he spends the most time in remain the most tellingly crumb-ridden evidence of this. The arrangement has its pros and cons: Ben's office, a well-lit converted bedroom on the second floor of his and Jen's house, is consistently spotless, but the layout of the space also puts Matt at eye level with the sleek bookshelf behind the desk, which is home to, among other objects meticulously selected by an interior decorator, a large framed photo of Ben and Jen kissing at their wedding sitting clownishly beside the Razzie they'd jointly won for *Gigli*.

There's no way to complain about it without sounding completely out of his mind, so Matt has gotten good at sucking it up. If he pushes harder for fast-tracking the office than he perhaps has any real reason to, no one questions him on it.

“We’re gonna be right by Plan B,” Ben says after they end their last call of the afternoon, leaning back in his chair, his hands folded over his stomach. “Should we egg Pitt’s car?”

Matt makes a face like, *come on*. “You think he’s ever there?”

That makes Ben laugh, a big one with his head thrown back and everything. It seems like an outsized reaction for such a nothing comment, though he has always liked when Matt gets bitchy.

“You wanna stick around for a bit?” Ben asks once he’s recovered. “I have an early cut I want to show you.”

Matt squints at him. “We wrapped, like, five minutes ago.”

“I have a *very* early cut of *one* scene I want to show you,” Ben amends cheerily. “Look, it’s barely anything. I pretty much bullied Bill into letting me see it. But exciting, right?”

Matt shakes his head. “You’re abusing your powers, man.”

Ben’s face breaks into a secretive smile. “Isn’t that why one directs?”

Matt bites at the inside of his lower lip. “I thought one directs because one wants to share one’s artistic vision with the world.”

“One directs to exact unregulated power over one’s cast and crew,” Ben says, and whatever he starts to say next is drowned out by a furious stampede of adolescent feet as Violet and Fin come bursting in, already involved in a fierce argument that is only broken up by a shrill chorus of “*Daaaaad*!”s.

“My *god*, you two are rude,” Ben says, amused. “Who raised you? Can you say hello, please?”

“Hi, Uncle Matt,” they both say with identical eye rolls.

“Hi, guys,” Matt says, smiling.

“Dad, Fin stole my book and keeps lying about it,” Violet says, crossing her arms pettishly. “*Again.*”

“Why would I *do that*,” Fin exclaims, which only outrages Violet more and commences another round of shouting.

Ben rubs a hand down his face. “Give me ten,” he says to Matt. “Go hang out in the studio, I’ll be right there.”

Matt wrinkles his nose.

“I cleaned up before you came,” Ben says, rolling his eyes just like his children.

“Don’t believe you,” Matt says, but happily scoots out of the room, patting Violet and Fin’s shoulders as he passes.

Getting to the studio, tucked away in the left wing of the palatial Lopez-Affleck compound, is a whole production that leads Matt through one of the many living rooms and two of the four kitchens. He finds Jen in the second, looking placid and dewy-skinned in a light blue workout set, drinking a green smoothie and tapping at her phone. Her flinty gaze flicks up to meet Matt’s immediately, as if she’d been waiting for him. He, on the other hand, hadn’t known she was home.

“Hey,” Matt says. He notices his body drawing up, like he’s trying to make himself taller, and promptly forces himself to chill, feeling like King Stupid. “Ben’s upstairs breaking up a fight.”

Jen laughs. “Book thief at it again?”

“Always,” Matt replies, and realizes he can’t think of even one other thing to say to her.

Jen takes control easily: “How was your meeting? Ben showed you the office I found, right?”

Matt feels a jolt of annoyance at the magnanimous edge to her words — *your* meeting, which wouldn’t be possible without the office *I* found — but can only nod; Ben had reminded them all, about five separate times, that Jen was the one who’d brought the space they were circling to his attention.

“Yeah, we all liked that one the best,” Matt says, smiling wanly. “We’re taking it.” A second too late, he adds, “It’s a great find, thanks for that.”

“You guys work hard, you should have a spot of your own,” she says, sounding breezy now, like she hadn’t even been looking for a thank you. Talking to Jen, he thinks, is not unlike getting thrown into a tennis match with zero preparation. “He’s been so excited about this. It’s something he’s wanted to do for so long.”

Another prickle of irritation. “Yeah, we’re both excited,” Matt parries, shoving his hands into his pockets. “We’ve basically been talking

about doing this since we were in our twenties." *Mine, mine, mine*, Matt thinks. *You don't get to claim him. He doesn't belong to you.*

Jen's neutral expression slides into something more diagnostic, and she's quiet for so long that Matt briefly fears he's accidentally said those psychotically possessive words out loud. The way Ben tells it — the way Ben has *always* told it — Jen, with her scintillating wit and her indefatigable work ethic, is the world's most fundamentally misunderstood sacrificial lamb. Matt knows this is how Ben gets with women, moony-eyed and worshiping, but it's never really gone away with Jen, the way it has with all the others.

Matt was thirty-two when the Ben and Jen storm (the first and, somehow, also the last) hit — a kid by his standards today, but old enough to know better. He'd tried the power couple thing because it felt like the thing to do at the time, but he's never had that fire in him that seems to come so naturally to Ben. He's never been interesting enough to have paps camping out on his lawn, or breathlessly following his car, or quaintly blending his name with another person's name. If he was really being honest, he'd admit that the closest thing he's ever had to anything like that, probably — hilariously — has been with Ben. Ben, though, has always had other irons in the fire. That's kind of his whole deal.

From Matt's view, Jen remains as impenetrable as the day they were introduced. Two decades later and her face is still coached into a perennial mask of cool, her voice still lowered into that same silky purr. She still looks at Matt like she can read his every ugly thought.

She can't, he thinks impotently, watching her hands spread elegantly across the massive island between them. "Are you on your way out?" she asks, not unkindly.

"Uh," Matt says, feeling his hackles rise despite her politeness. "Not yet, Ben has some cut of a scene he wants to show me."

Jen hums an affirmative *mmm*, directing her attention to her drink. He watches her swirl the straw around a few times. "Do you miss it? Being on set together?"

Matt blinks, disarmed. "Oh — I mean. It's work. We'll do it again." Trying to rearrange the conversation back into their usual routine of chilly pleasantries, he makes a vague, wry gesture in the general direction of the stairs. "And obviously we're handling the separation great."

Jen gives him a mild look, lifting the straw to her lips. “Yeah, you guys always manage to find time alone together, don’t you?”

Their eyes stay locked as she sips, and something churns uneasily in his gut. He’s misinterpreting her, he’s sure he is — *another ungenerous reading of Jen’s intentions*, chides a voice in his head that sounds a lot like Ben’s — except for the fact that he’s not really sure at all. For one horrifying second, he thinks that this might be the clearest he and Jen have ever seen each other.

Before he can drum up a response, Ben ambles in, looking winded but glad to see them both. “The case of the missing book has been solved, and also I think my child might be a kleptomaniac,” he informs them, sidling up to Jen and sniffing her beverage. “What’d I miss, what are we talking about?”

“You,” Matt answers dully.

Jen adds, in a teasing tone, “What else?”

Ben mimes a swoon and smacks a kiss to Jen’s cheek before coming to throw an arm around Matt’s shoulders. “She can't protect you from the horrors of the studio. You’d better just accept now that you’re probably gonna sit on at least one empty Coke can.”

“Can’t wait,” Matt says, eager to be steered out of the room. He’s certain he feels Jen’s eyes on him as they round the corner, but he refuses to glance back to check.

*

Here’s another story they never tell:

Matt’s big boardroom speech was one of the last scenes they shot for the movie, a logistical nightmare that involved coordinating the schedules of nine very busy actors, one he and Ben had gone into knowing they only had a single afternoon to nail. Anxiety rarely ate away at him from within the way it used to, having long since found the sweet spot with his Klonopin dosage, but he felt the complete weight of the pressure on his shoulders just sitting down across from Viola. After a couple of takes of Matt fumbling a few lines, Ben got up from Phil’s seat at the head of the table to crouch beside Matt,

swiveling his chair around so Matt was faced away from the rest of the room, so he could only see Ben.

“It’s really hard to take you seriously in that wig,” Matt said, embarrassed. He tipped his head back, looking up in frustration at the drab ceiling tiles.

“Hey,” Ben said. “You could do this in your sleep, man. There’s not a fucking doubt in my mind about that.”

“I *know*,” Matt muttered, shaking his head. “I don’t know what my problem is. It’s ridiculous.”

“It’s really not,” Ben said, his voice gentle and private, his big hands coming to rest on Matt’s knees. Matt felt them like warm anchors through the thin fabric of Sonny’s slacks. “Hey,” he said again, and then, more insistent, “Look at me.”

Matt obeyed, relieved to find that when he met his eyes it was just Ben staring back at him, looking, for the most part, like he always did.

“This is ours,” Ben said, like he was letting Matt in on some closely guarded secret. “It’s for us. If anyone else likes it, that’s just a bonus.” He rubbed his hands reassuringly up and down Matt’s thighs. “You know I got you.”

Matt nodded, as certain of that as he was certain of his own name. Three takes later, as one of the cameras pushed in on Matt, holding for a beat after he delivered his final, impassioned line, Ben called cut. When Matt caught his eye, his face was illuminated by a huge, giddy grin.

Later, Ben found Matt in his trailer, where he’d stepped away during lunch to wind down. Matt was still in costume but Ben had changed back into civilian clothes: a white t-shirt that clung to his arms and chest over a snug pair of jeans. He was looking good lately and it was tough not to notice, especially with how shamelessly he was flaunting it.

“I told my mom you were giving a speech to Viola today,” Ben said by way of greeting, splaying out beside him on the couch. “I think she’s prouder of you than she is of me.”

Matt offered a lazy half-bow. “Everything I do, I do for Chris.”

“Kiss-ass,” Ben said. He reclined against the cushions, his head lolling

toward Matt. “How you feeling?”

Matt lolled his head back to match him. “Good. Better.” He didn’t thank him; they were long past that, but he gave Ben a look that he seemed to understand the meaning of, nodding his agreement.

“I always know what you need,” he said, patting Matt’s knee in a brief mimic of his calming technique from earlier.

It struck Matt as a funny thing to say, though not, like, ha-ha funny. He was still trying to work out what kind of funny he meant when Ben changed the subject: “I can’t believe we’re almost done. I feel like we’ve been here for months.”

“Oh, and how I love to while away the time with you, too, dear,” Matt said tonelessly.

“In a *good way*,” Ben said. “In an I’m-considering-inventing-a-reason-to-hold-up-production-just-to-prolong-it way.”

“Not a good look, Mr. Artists Equity,” Matt teased, nudging his arm with his elbow. “I get it. I could keep going like this, no problem. Even when it inevitably gets to the point where everyone else drops out and it’s just the two of us rambling incoherently into the camera.”

Ben’s eyes flashed gleefully. “Ooh, yeah. Me telling you what to do, no one there to rein me in.”

“You’d like that too much,” Matt said. Their heads had fallen closer together as they spoke, he noted.

“What’s not to like?” Ben murmured, and Matt only jumped a little when he felt the snag of his hand around his knee again. “You’re a good listener.”

“I’m a captive audience,” Matt said, impassive. He glanced at where Ben’s hand was lingering, a needling burst of — *something* making his pulse kick up, just a bit. He felt it in his throat; it felt like a threat. “You’re literally holding me captive. It’s not the same thing.”

A grin split across Ben’s face. “You’re getting paid a *lot* to be here, asshole.” He glanced at the door. “I mean, you could leave.”

Matt swallowed. “It’s *my* trailer.”

Ben’s expression turned mischievous. “Good point. Go get me a

water."

Matt laughed in disbelief, but Ben didn't falter. He just continued studying Matt expectantly from under his lashes. He'd said what he said in a way that sounded like he was asking for something else. Without Matt noticing, the energy around them had shifted, turning strange and syrupy.

And then Matt, his head full of fuzz, got up. With one eye trained on Ben, he grabbed a water bottle from the fridge, mindful of keeping their fingers from brushing when he gave it over. He didn't reclaim his seat, just stood there in front of Ben, his hands perched on his hips. A muffled roar of chatter rose from outside, people going about their afternoons just a few feet away. He was pretty positive Ben hadn't locked the door when he'd come barging in earlier.

Matt raised his eyebrows at the bottle, which Ben held carelessly in both hands. "You're not even gonna drink it?"

"Nah," Ben said, tossing it aside.

Matt made a wide gesture, his impatience mounting. "Okay. Now what? Don't you have a set to run?"

"I do," Ben said, his thighs spreading with measured ease that — if Matt wasn't mistaken, if he wasn't completely reading this wrong — bordered on suggestive. Matt stared him down with a furrowed brow, wondering if Ben was taking so long to get to his fucking point because he was trying to offer Matt an out. They'd always been good at that, when it came to each other.

Matt could have taken it. He could have laughed it off, went for the door, and left Ben sitting there with his legs wide open like the slut he was. *So go do that*, Matt might've said, or maybe even, *Get out of here before this turns into a sexual harrassment suit*. For one second, Matt imagined a world where he was a better person.

"You could take your pants off," Ben said — casual, like he was commenting on the weather. The only thing that gave him away were his eyes, dark and heavy-lidded. Matt stared back at him incredulously, following the movement of his arm as he stretched it out across the back of the couch, his other hand coming to rest absently in his lap.

This was bad, Matt concluded with dizzy resignation. The air in the trailer was chokingly tense, and neither of them moved right away. He

hoped for someone to open the door, for a phone to ring, for an earthquake to hit.

When none of those things happened, Matt reached for his belt, letting his pants fall down his hips and pool on the floor, leaving him standing there in Sonny's sweater and his boxer briefs. Humiliatingly, his cock was already stiffening, the growing outline of it agonizingly visible with the protective layer removed. There was nowhere to hide.

One long, awful moment passed where Ben didn't do anything, just stared at him with wide eyes and slightly parted lips. At a severe loss, Matt clenched his hands into shaking fists as he leveled Ben with a pleading look, and had just about convinced himself he'd fucked up spectacularly when Ben's whole demeanor changed. He made a rumbly, appreciative sound, his knees falling open wider. "Show me," he said, his voice like gravel. "But don't touch."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Matt muttered, shamefully relieved for the instruction, inching his waistband down until his cock sprung out. He'd gone from half-erect to blazingly hard in about five seconds flat, his arousal skyrocketing. He saw and heard Ben notice, his nostrils flaring as he let out a breath through his nose. Sweat drenched the collar of Matt's sweater. His face was aflame, his body held in a rigid line, his legs numb.

"Look at you," Ben whispered. When Matt's eyes flickered to his lap, he clocked the disorienting sight of the thickening bulge in Ben's pants, which Ben didn't seem to care about, his full attention lasered in on Matt. "Okay, you can touch yourself. Do it slow."

Matt released a broken, whimpering moan and followed the order, wrapping a hand around himself, rubbing his thumb laboriously over the leaking tip. Someone's laughter on the other side of the wall bled into the charged space, and the awareness that they were doing this in full proximity of everyone they worked with danced at the blurry edge of his addled mind. The thought was swiftly pushed away when he saw how Ben sat up when Matt inched his fist down the length, stroking loosely.

"Good," Ben said, his voice pitched so low Matt could barely hear him over his own raging pulse. "You've been so good for me these past few weeks, Matty. You take direction so well, just like I knew you would."

Matt could barely breathe under the weight of Ben's gaze. Being watched — being watched by *Ben* — was making him feel feverish

and frantic, his hand moving unwittingly faster. Ben caught it right away and shook his head minutely, a wordless reminder that he was running the show. Matt groaned pitifully, forcing his arm to slow again, flattening his palm so he could smear precome down the length.

"I know you need this," Ben said sympathetically. "Need me. Just like you needed me earlier, reminding you why you're here. I like doing that for you." He got a wicked look on his face when he added, "Grab your balls. Let me see."

"Fucking — *Ben*—" Matt ground out, but did as he was told, moving his hand lower to massage his balls. He tipped his head down, chin to chest, right on the unbearable edge of coming. The motion of his arm made his cock, untouched and desperate for relief, bob helplessly.

"You keep so much shit in," Ben said, tracking Matt's movements with unblinking focus. "You have to let go, you deserve to. You need me to be the one who tells you to?" A responding anguished noise emerged from somewhere within Matt, which made Ben shake his head again. "Answer me. Do I have to be the one to tell you when to let go?"

"*Yes*," Matt managed roughly, like it had been violently dragged out of him. "I need you. Fuck — I *need* you."

Ben hummed his agreement. "Yeah, you do. Get your hand around your cock again, Matty. Go as fast as you need. But don't come until I say you can."

Matt wasted no time, setting an unrelenting pace as he resumed his tight grip around his dick, groaning deeply as it glided wetly through his fist. He was trembling all over, distantly worried he'd fall to his knees and combust if Ben didn't let him come soon. He wouldn't, not without permission, but he wanted *so badly* to get permission.

"*Ben*," Matt whined, hating how stripped he sounded.

Ben smiled, indulgent. "What, baby?"

Matt's jaw set stubbornly, refusing to let the words take shape. He squeezed his cock cruelly, trying to hold off even as he begged, "Can I come? Please?"

Ben laughed, but when Matt's head snapped up, ready to be offended, there wasn't anything mocking in his expression. No, Ben was pink-faced and handsome, his body relaxed despite the erection pressing

urgently against the seam of his jeans. At some point, his heated stare had gone soft — loving.

"You can come, but keep looking at me," Ben said, which was all Matt needed to hear. One more erratic jerk of his wrist and his orgasm was tearing through him in powerful waves, his body quivering as he gasped through it. Even as come erupted over his fist, on his shirt, on the fucking *floor*, he didn't look away, and neither did Ben, who sat before him murmuring soothing nonsense words: *That's it, Matty, you're so good, you look so fucking good*.

He came back to himself in waves, his chest rising and falling with every heaving breath. Ben watched it happen silently, and somewhere between him allowing Matt to come and Matt coming, a complicated look had settled on his features.

"Do you want — uh—" Matt mumbled as he tucked himself gingerly back into his underwear, eyeing the tent in Ben's pants. Inconvenient thoughts of getting his hand around Ben and then, improbably, his *mouth* around Ben, were banished when he shook his head, climbing to his feet. Ben's hand disappeared under his waistband, adjusting himself with the deftness of a man who had a lifetime of experience concealing his boners.

"Nah, I'm good," Ben said, to Matt's sincere disappointment. There was a small but telling mess all around them, the evidence of what they'd just done everywhere. Suddenly, Matt was humiliated, feeling bare in a way he hadn't a moment ago. Matt didn't know what to say to him, especially not when Ben busied himself with grabbing the forgotten water bottle off the couch, which he shoved into Matt's clean hand before heading for the door. "Drink that, it'll help. See you out there, man."

The door swung shut behind him, and Matt stood frozen to the spot, part of him waiting for Ben to burst back in, laughing hysterically: *You should've seen your face!* Nothing happened.

"Are you fucking kidding me," Matt said, his shaky voice reverberating off the walls of the empty trailer. He tried again, willing someone, anyone, *something*, to answer him: "Are you *fucking kidding me*?"

*

Look, it's not as if they'd been embroiled in some sexually unsupervised bacchanal. Nothing remotely close to it, nothing that could ever be construed as comparable by even the most uncharitable of juries, has happened since. They'd barely *done* anything at all; they hadn't even touched. It was a highly emotional moment of weakness at worst, an utterly forgettable blip in the grand scheme of his fifties at best. A mid-life crisis, even: Some guys dated twenty-somethings and got garish back tattoos, others dropped their pants at work and masturbated in front of their best friend. And in the interest of keeping score, Matt had only done one of those things, arguably the one that caused the least amount of permanent damage. If it wasn't Ben, if they weren't them, it wouldn't even be needling at him.

He thinks about it in therapy, Lucy sitting cross-legged beside him, explaining to their therapist how she feels he's been too wrapped up in work lately, and also always. They've been having some version of this conversation for years and it's never amounted to much other than some empty, assuaging promises on his end, but he indulges her because he knows it's a problem — he can admit it now, therapy has at least gotten him to a place of acceptance. But she knows he'll always be the way he is. She knows what she married. Once, he'd complained about it to Ben, which had been a mistake: *The key is finding a wife who's as big of a workaholic as you are*, he'd said sagely, so phenomenally antagonizing that Matt's only defense was to change the subject.

He hadn't told her about what happened in the trailer. He'd come to that decision about eight seconds after Ben walked out on him. It was better this way, didn't make sense any other way, just like it didn't make sense to report back to her every time he jerked off. There's no point, not when they have kids to take to school and dogs to walk and dinners to cook, not when five-hundred more important things happen to them in a day. He'd agreed to couples therapy to discuss his work-life balance, or lack thereof, and it would be a waste of everyone's time to muddy their actual issues with something Matt is actively trying to put behind him, with something a therapist would be all too eager to poke and prod at. He is neither unfulfilled nor unsatisfied in his marriage, remains as deeply in love with and attracted to Lucy as he's always been. But he also isn't so delusional that he can't see how something like what he and Ben did would look like from the outside, to the prying eyes of those who don't know them, the types of questions it would welcome.

It's just that what really pisses him off is how predictable it all is. Ben *would* rope him into an utterly avoidable and unnecessarily complicated situation because Ben has been roping him into utterly avoidable and unnecessarily complicated situations since that time he convinced Matt to make a blood brothers pact using Matt's mother's extremely sharp kitchen knife. (He still has the jagged scar to prove it.) It was so Ben to take and take and take, to shine an oppressively bright light and promptly cut the cord before it gets too real. Like a fussy infant or a high-maintenance plant, Ben requires undue amounts of attention in order to function. Out of some childlike sense of loyalty, Matt has come to his defense about the fame whore shit countless times, but it's hard to keep denying when the patterns keep repeating. Ben needs attention until he decides he doesn't, until the glossy sheen begins to crack and he starts looking for the next thing to occupy him. Matt's pitied the dozens of unsuspecting women who have fallen into the trap, has pitied even more the ones who believed they'd be the ones to stick it out, to change him, even as Ben imploded on himself, time and time again. But what does it say about Matt that he's hung around through it all? What purpose did his desperate bid to find meaning in the fact that Ben had been his first ultimately serve? He'd been left standing around with his dick quite literally in his hands; he's no different than any of the rest.

And they hadn't even touched. Ben hadn't even wanted to touch him.

Months later, in the grueling rat race of another never-ending press day, Matt tells a story: "This is true, I had negotiated extensively in couples therapy with my wife about taking an acting break," he says, which prompts some tittering from Emily and Cillian. They're on one of those fake living room sets with the couches and the plants and the coffee tables that do nothing to make up for how harshly the lights are beating down on them. He feels tired down to his bones. He can't remember why he started talking about this. "The one caveat to my taking time off was if Chris Nolan called."

"Like a hall pass," Em says wickedly.

Matt laughs. "Yes, which triggered a brand new round of therapy. The conversations were *very* different after that."

Chris smiles politely.

"Acting break, says the man with two movies out right now," Downey crows. His eyes are alight; the guy cannot stand to stay silent for longer than eight seconds. "Modern psychology is *not* working on you.

Who comes up more often in couples therapy, Chris Nolan or Ben Affleck?"

Matt straightens in his seat. He can hear the amused *oohs* coming from the gaggle of interviewers and producers behind the camera.

Em pats his shoulder, protective. "Matt has a lot of hall passes, he can't help it. Everyone wants him."

"Listen, we're well beyond Ben at this point," Matt jokes. "My wife has recused herself from touching that with a ten foot pole." He's *joking*, he is, or he might as well be, because everyone laughs and Chris swoops in with an anecdote about the script and it's not like any of them can feel the heat licking around Matt's collar, anyway.

*

He skips the red carpet at the Globes.

It's the right move, dodging the snapping lenses in favor of finding his seat early, Lucy at his side. Aside from a few TV types milling around in the back and the various members of the scampering crew, they're the first ones in the ballroom. They gossip about Alexia's new boyfriend — he'd shown up to dinner wearing a Yankees cap and Matt hated him instantly, while Lucy was trying to be more diplomatic — and he drapes his jacket over her shoulders when he notices her shivering in the overzealous air conditioning, too much for January, even in LA. She looks particularly gorgeous that night, her hair falling in loose waves around her face, and he feels so overwhelmingly grateful for her presence that he can't resist leaning in to kiss her. In the nearly empty room, it feels almost private.

Through the thin barrier of his closed eyelids, he sees a large shadow fall over them, and a voice pierces through their little bubble: "Sir, you're behaving indecently and I've been sent to escort you off the premises," and Matt's already mid-laugh as he pulls away from Lucy, turning to face Ben. "Your lovely date can stay where she is."

"Hey, man, I was told I'd get to meet those *Succession* people tonight, I'm not going anywhere until someone tells me to fuck off," Matt says, acting on the happy urge to pull Ben into him.

“Fuck off,” Ben says cheerily, letting Matt wind his arms around his shoulders as he drops into the chair on Matt’s other side. Ben nestles back into him, a warm weight against his chest, looking tan and sleek in his tux and smelling like a familiar mix of his usual woody cologne and cigarettes. Catching wind of this display, the cameramen, who had previously been ignoring Matt, came swarming to get a shot of the pair of them cozied up. Ben throws an obliging wave in their direction.

“Hi, honey,” Ben says, craning his head to smile at Lucy. And then, to Matt, just as fond: “Hi, honey.”

Lucy reaches over to pat his bearded cheek. “Where’s Jen?”

“She’s holding down the carpet for both of us,” Ben says, curling his hand around Matt’s where it rests against his collarbone in a quick squeeze before he sits up properly. “A little Irish birdie told me he saw you guys sneak in early.” He offers a shrug, leaning an elbow on the table. “Sounded like more fun to me.”

“Well, Ruffalo’s shifty and I wasn’t about to let him claim my spot,” Matt says, never mind the elaborate seating chart that deliberately put him and Ben together at the front of the room. Sometimes it’s fun to pretend. “And when Chalamet shows up, I mean, forget it.”

Ben sighs wistfully. “Remember when that was us?”

“That was *never* us — with the hair and everything? Come on.”

“You guys were cute, but he’s *way* cuter,” Lucy says, smirking when Matt pokes her in the side.

Ben shakes his head, his hand coming up to grasp Matt’s shoulder, closing in on his space again. “You didn’t know him then, Luce, but a better face has never existed than this guy at twenty-five, twenty-six.” He takes Matt’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting his face toward him. Matt doesn’t resist, meeting his eyes: tired and dear. “It was like looking into the sun.”

Feeling abruptly knocked off-kilter, like he’d had the rug pulled out from under him, Matt swats Ben away and deadpans, “Yeah, and what happened, right?” The companionable pull he’d felt earlier, to touch Ben, to be touched by him, is gone in a flash. He thinks of ill-fitting polos and Nike Swooshes, of Ben’s hands on his body in front of a fleet of cameras, of *you have to let go, you deserve to*, and shifts a subtle distance closer to Lucy.

Ben looks unfazed, which — whatever. Lucy asks him, “How’s Sam doing with basketball this year?” which is the kind of safe topic that gets Ben talking, brightening with pride and gesturing animatedly. By the time Jen shows up, her shiny hair flawlessly styled and her elaborate gown fanning out behind her, the mood has settled into something more normal. Matt greets her with an anemic embrace and Ben sits between them and everything’s fine. Everything is absolutely fine.

He and Ben present together, and Ben ribs him for having to put on his glasses in order to read the teleprompter, and Chris, holding his statue in that reserved English way of his, lets Ben yammer his ear off as they clear off the stage. Matt loses to Giamatti, obviously, and elbows Ben when he leans over to whisper in his ear, *Multi-time award-losing actor indeed*, and resolutely ignores it when Ben and Jen start making out during a commercial break, pouring himself a generous glass of Moet from one of the many bottles strewn around the table. Backstage, after it’s all over, he wedges between Downey and Ludwig for the cast photos and silently vows to get drunker at the after party. At some point, in the throes of it all, he’d developed a persistent headache just above his left eye.

The night gets easier when he loses sight of Ben and Jen. He pays his respects to Marty and Spielberg before dropping in at the little corner Bateman and Messina and their wives have carved out, leaving Lucy there to whisper with Amanda when he drifts over to join Emily and Cillian at the bar, where they’re involved in a jokey tiff over Cillian’s Globe.

“It’s just very heavy,” Cillian is saying, glancing at it reproachfully. “And now I’m meant to carry it around all night.”

“Unbelievable,” Em says, rolling her eyes. “I’ve got one and I posed for hours like a good little student. Matt’s got about a million, he always says thank you and moves on.”

“I have two,” he says, flagging down the bartender for a glass of wine. “They’re pretty heavy.”

“You know, there’s humble and then there’s whatever *this* is,” Em says, which sends Cillian into a small fit of laughter. “And you,” she says sharply, addressing Matt, “Why weren’t you sitting with us, hm?”

Matt takes a sip of wine — *cheap*, he thinks, and sips again. Says, “I had a prior commitment.”

She sighs. “Too busy with your shoes and your A-team friends. I see how it is.”

His head throbs in agreement: That *had* been very ridiculous of him. “Never again,” he promises. “Sometimes you want to not laugh at shitty jokes in peace, which is hard to do when you’re sitting next to two horny fifty-year-olds all night.” The words leave his mouth and he registers them with surprise; it’s like someone else had, for a second, taken control of his mouth. He exhales a laugh at his own bitter audacity.

Em and Cillian exchange a look that Matt isn’t interested in unpacking, and he uses the arrival of someone coming to congratulate Cillian as an excuse to slip away from Em’s probing gaze. He’s draining his glass when he runs into Cheadle, who thrusts a Heineken into his hand and pulls him into a spirited conversation that Matt can hardly follow but is happy to zone out to for what ends up being a good thirty minutes, until Cheadle turns away to take a call. He drinks some more, swiping various glasses off passing waiters’ trays. Amid a sea of tailored tuxes and slinky gowns, he finds Natalie, stifling a yawn and inching toward the exit. He looks at her and shoves his hands in his pockets and feels present only physically, his mind far gone.

“I need a cigarette,” Natalie announces.

“I quit,” Matt says robotically, trailing after her like a lost dog.

Out front, the hotel’s breezy valet area has been transformed into a glorified smoking section through the sheer power of numbers. They join the glassy-eyed congregation puffing away like their lives depend on it; he exchanges waves with Kirsten and is comforted by the knowledge that none of them feel any obligation to approach each other. There’s freedom to the smoking section, a place of unparalleled fraternity that he suddenly misses so powerfully that it briefly cracks open the corner of his mind which had been cauterized by the hypnotist who’d convinced him smoking was bad.

Matt is just drunk enough to peer at Natalie’s cigarette with interest. “Can I—” He gestures at it with two fingers.

“*I quit*,” she mocks, passing it over to him.

He takes a drag and instantly starts coughing, which makes him laugh, which makes him cough more. “I’m out of practice,” he mumbles, lifting the cigarette to his lips again. “Tonight kind of sucked, right?”

Natalie looks at him askance, taking her cigarette back. “Says the guy in the movie that won everything.”

“No, I just meant—” He pauses, deciding that his grim mood has done enough damage. “You know what? Doesn’t matter.”

She appraises him, her head tilted thoughtfully. “Don’t beat yourself up. Go home to your kids and start over tomorrow.” She shrugs, already half turned away as she heads in the direction of the bored-looking valet attendant. “Usually works for me.”

He watches her retreating back for a beat and then checks his phone for the first time in hours, swiping open the text from Lucy sitting at the top of his notifications: *Stella’s sick, I took the car home but ran into Ben and he said he’d drop you off whenever you’re ready to go xo*. Perturbed, he heart reacts to her message and is opening his Uber app when a pungent cloud of smoke smacks him directly in the eyes.

He blinks hard against the tears that immediately form, throwing a blind hand out until he makes contact with Ben’s idiot face, slapping his cheek a few times.

Matt frowns deeply at him. “Dick,” he says, with feeling.

Ben smirks around his cigarette. “What are you doing out here, quitter?”

“This is the valet area,” Matt says, crossing his arms over his chest. “You can’t claim the whole valet area. I’m reclaiming it.”

“I literally saw you smoking before,” Ben says, and it is such a remarkably maddening thing to say after a long night of him saying and doing remarkably maddening things that Matt, having officially hit his breaking point, can’t stop himself from getting up in his face.

“You are so bad at minding your own goddamn business,” Matt snaps. “You just can’t fucking help yourself. You know, one of these days you’re gonna have to find someone else to be obsessed with.”

Ben’s expression hardens. “Well, I think we both know how you react every time I do that.”

Matt’s wild pulse pounds. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about,” he lies. He’s getting the distinct sense that they’re toeing the razor’s edge of something dangerous here. “It’s not funny and it’s not fair. I want you to stop. I’m getting really fucking sick of it.”

Ben huffs an incredulous laugh. “Of *what*? What am I doing? Can you even say it?” Before Matt can answer, Ben leans in, so close that Matt can smell his stale breath, hissing, “If I’m doing anything, it’s because you started it. It’s *always* because you started it.” He draws back far enough to indignantly flick away his cigarette. His brow is furrowed, his mouth pinched into a thin line. His tie has gone loose and askew, the bow starting to come undone. “I’ve spent forty fucking years reacting to the shit you’ve thrown at me,” Ben spits. “And you’ve spent forty fucking years acting like it’s *just* me. Like you’re not an active participant in your own life.”

“*I’ve* been acting like—” Matt can’t finish the thought, his mouth gaping. A disbelieving breath leaves him in a rush. “It’s so easy for you. God, you have no idea — no idea what I’m thinking.”

“Then *tell me*,” Ben exclaims, which earns them a few sidelong looks from their fellow smokers milling around nearby. Quieter, he scoffs: “*Easy*. Fuck you, no, Matt, it’s not easy. You have to tell me. Right now.”

Matt rubs his forehead, sparing a glance around their immediate vicinity. His publicist brain activates, forcing him to envision the Page Six headline (*Matt Damon and Ben Affleck have tense, public argument after Golden Globes*, or some shit equivalent) and he thinks that this night has been bad enough without the rags getting involved.

He asks, “Where’s Jen?”

A muscle in Ben’s jaw twitches. “She left. She was tired.”

“And you told Lucy you’d take me home,” Matt says carefully.

Ben nods, a slow thing.

“Alright,” Matt says, “Let’s go,” and that’s that.

*

They behave like monks the entire ride, but Matt wonders if there will be photos of them waiting on the curb for their car, of Matt not realizing he’d been trembling in the cold until Ben’s arm snaked around him, pulling Matt snugly against his chest. *I’m fine*, Matt had

muttered, bending his head against Ben's shoulder. *Maybe I'm not fine*, Ben replied, his hand curling around Matt's bicep, which was how they'd stayed until their car pulled up.

He hasn't spent much time at Ben's Brentwood place, but he knows it exists, obviously. It's practically a closet compared to his and Jen's mansion, a rental he refuses to get too comfortable in and has nonetheless spent months paying for. It's not weird for people like them to have multiple homes, and he'd thought nothing of it when Ben told him he was signing the lease. But now, as they orbit each other in the cavernous darkness of the foyer:

"What, is this where you bring your fucking — hook-ups back to?"

Ben releases a half laugh. "No. Jesus." A pause. "Is that what you are?"

Matt quiets. "No," he says, his throat dry. He feels sober, almost painfully so.

"No," Ben agrees, taking a tentative step forward, like he's afraid of spooking Matt. It's funny to watch such a large man trying to shrink himself, funny until Matt remembers he's the reason for Ben's caved-in posture. Uncertainty flashes across Ben's face, and Matt gets the disorienting feeling of watching a highlights reel of his own life, forced to reevaluate every interaction they've ever had with fresh eyes.

With finality, Matt murmurs, "Okay," as he sways close enough to tangle his fingers in the hair at the back of Ben's head. Rests his other hand on his shoulder, guides his face down until their mouths are brushing. Ben hunches without complaint, his eyes alert as his body goes pliant in Matt's arms. "Okay," Matt repeats, giving them both permission, and kisses him.

There's perfect synchronicity to the way they meet each other's lips, like they'd rehearsed it. Matt pours himself into it fully, letting Ben work his mouth open with thorough licks, letting Ben's tongue push past his teeth. Ben holds him by the hips, pulling Matt firmly against him, tugging him in so their chests are flush and their knees are knocking and they're treading clumsily on each other's shoes. Ben tries to haul him impossibly closer, until Matt's pushing up on his toes, framing Ben's jaw between his palms. In a white hot flash, the kiss turns frantic and filthy, Matt's back arching with the effort of grinding his rapidly hardening erection against Ben's. Their muffled moans fill

the room, a lewd cacophony.

Matt breaks off with a gasp, deflating down to his heels, resting his temple against Ben's sternum as he gathers himself. Ben rubs his back, his hands a grounding pressure.

"What if I was like, 'You know what, turns out, not for me,' and just left," Matt jokes, gratified by the gift of Ben's answering laughter, his chest moving under Matt's cheek.

"It'd still be a top ten life moment for me," Ben says, and it's a total line, but the pleased buzz at Matt's nape makes him inclined to trust him.

He lifts his head, finds Ben's eyes, notices for the first time the naked hunger in them. He understands with dizzying clarity that Ben is holding back because he thinks it's what Matt needs, can feel it in the iron clutch of Ben's hands at his waist. It activates something urgent within him as he surges up to bring them into another mess of a kiss. When he speaks, he does so against Ben's lips, panting, "We're too old to be doing this here."

"Speak for yourself," Ben says, fumbling with the buttons on Matt's shirt.

Matt pulls Ben back by the scruff of his neck. "Come on, bed. Do you have a bed in this place?"

Ben leers. "Oh, I have *several*."

Stumbling upstairs is a drawn-out endeavor as they stop every few steps to kiss and paw at each other's clothes and grind against each other with the graceless abandon of teenagers. He's so concentrated on making sure Ben doesn't doubt how badly he wants this that he feels light-headed with purpose. It's a bit like a dam bursting open; he can't seem to stop grabbing needily at Ben, like every time Matt lets him go his brain is unable to accept that he'll come right back.

At the top of the stairs, as Ben is pressing him into the banister, one of their knees cracks noisily, shattering the haze and making them both freeze as they look at each other like, *Was that you or me?* They burst into hysterics, the tension dissipating.

"Yeah, fine, we're old," Ben says.

"I keep telling you."

Ben runs a hand through Matt's hair. "You're all gray now."

Matt hums his assent, fiddling with the buckle on Ben's belt. Teases, "You still think I'm cute?"

Ben kisses his forehead sweetly. Says, "Stop fishing, asshole, you know exactly how I feel about you."

Heat roils in Matt's gut. His cock twitches. Ben must feel it, guiding him in the direction of what Matt assumes is the master and spreading him out on the expansively plush mattress. The room around them is neat and austere as a hotel suite, but the sheets smell comfortingly like Ben.

Solid and wide above him, Ben starts to undress him properly, discarding Matt's shirt, yanking his pants down his thighs, unlacing his shoes. It all falls to the floor in a big expensive pile, each borrowed garment sure to be a wrinkled disaster in minutes, but Matt's too busy tracking Ben's procession down his body to care. He watches, rapt, as Ben's tongue circles each of his nipples, as his mouth presses against the softened grooves of his abs, ghosts over his cock, kisses the vulnerable points of his ankles. Mapping him out, like Matt's body is something worth exploring.

Breathless, Matt can't stop his hips from hitching up as Ben settles between his legs, sucking at the sensitive juncture of his thigh. They hadn't flipped on the lights, but whoever had been here last had left the curtains open, and Matt stares in dumb fascination at the dim stream of moonlight reflecting an otherworldly glow off Ben's crisp white shirt as he nuzzles against the rock hard bulge in Matt's boxers.

"Ben," Matt says, shivering at how his own voice bounces off the walls. To his own ears, he sounds ragged — run through, already.

"I've wanted this for-fucking-ever," Ben tells him, staring at Matt's clothed dick with glazed-over eyes. He seems lost in his own world, his tongue darting out to lick at the wet spot staining the clean cotton, tracing over where the fabric pulls taut over Matt's balls, hovering right over where Matt needs him. "Thought about it so many times. Thought about what it'd be like to suck you off."

"*Ben*," Matt repeats, hands scrabbling at Ben's shoulders. "Show me."

Ben grunts, peeling Matt's boxers off unceremoniously so his cock can spring out, slapping against his stomach. His breathing goes labored as Ben squeezes around the base of him, licking at a drop of precome,

sucking affectionately at the leaking head. He wraps an arm around one of Matt's thighs, hauling his leg over his shoulder, pushing himself up until he's kneeling over Matt's lap.

"Fuck," Matt groans, sinking his hands into Ben's hair, which has Ben humming appreciatively around his mouthful, sending vibrations down the shaft that feel so unbelievably good Matt wonders if he could come just from that. He doesn't have time to dwell on it, not when Ben's lips are stretching as he sinks lower, taking him deeper until he's swallowed almost all of Matt's dick, nosing into Matt's pubic hair. *He's done this before*, Matt realizes with potent lucidity, watching in staggered awe as Ben bobs on him, his nails digging into Matt's ass. Jealousy spikes in tandem with blinding arousal; without realizing, Matt had started fucking his mouth punishingly. Ben hadn't protested, *isn't* protesting — his eyes closed, making these wet little gagging noises.

"Sorry, sorry," Matt breathes, his hips stalling, giving Ben room to come up for air.

Ben coughs, shaking his head, rubbing Matt's knee reassuringly. "I was letting you," he says, his voice deliciously hoarse.

"I just—" Matt says, swallowing thickly. "I don't want to come yet." Then, hushed, like a confession: "I want to fuck you."

Ben looks up, his pupils blown wide, but his expression otherwise unreadable. A pornographic string of saliva and precome hangs from his bottom lip, keeping him connected to Matt's cock.

Matt wipes away the mess with his thumb. "That cool with you?"

"Very cool," Ben rasps, and grants Matt the incredible sight of him disrobing with unselfconscious ease. He's in, frankly, insane shape, his arms and abs finely chiseled like he's fucking twenty, the well-cut V of his Adonis belt pointing erotically toward his cock, which hangs heavy and flushed between his legs. He's so goddamn handsome it almost hurts to look at him. The image is ruined in the most Ben of ways, by the assortment of unsightly tattoos marring his skin.

"You look ridiculous," Matt says, greedily drinking in the sight of him, ink and all.

"You love it," Ben says, pecking him on the lips before leaning over to retrieve a travel sized bottle of lube from the bedside drawer.

“Nothing on the walls, but you have lube,” Matt says, making a face. “You fucking deviant.”

Ben’s grin turns devilish. “You *love it.*”

Matt sits up to switch their positions, kissing Ben slow and dirty until he’s melting against the pillows. He’s getting good at this, at learning how Ben likes to be kissed. It helps that Ben is vocal, making sounds of approval when Matt sucks on his bottom lip, when he uses a graze of teeth. Matt’s learning about himself, too: He likes the feeling of Ben’s beard scraping against his skin, likes it when Ben moans into his mouth and he can feel it at the back of his throat. They make out for a while, Ben’s arms curving around him, his hands on Matt’s back, kneading at the muscles underneath. Matt hums into each caress, putting his fingertips to Ben’s jaw to feel the way it works with the effort. Their cocks, trapped between the tight press of their bodies, slide slickly against each other. He feels transported, sixteen again and so stupidly horny he can barely think, not knowing what to do next, where to take it.

One of Ben’s long legs winds around his waist, his heel digging into Matt’s ass, urging him to rock forward. The slight change in angle makes them both groan, Matt pulling back far enough to fumble for the lube, pouring it over his fingers, his dick. He stops to look at Ben beneath him, hesitating.

Ben scratches a hand through Matt’s hair. “Relax. I like it.”

Matt raises his eyebrows. Says, dumbly, “I didn’t know that.”

“At what point in the last four decades was I supposed to tell you I like getting fucked in the ass?”

Just the words are enough to send a tremor through Matt. “At *any* point, asshole,” he mumbles pettily, ducking his head to brush his lips over the center of Ben’s chest.

Ben laughs loudly. “You’re the asshole, asshole.”

Matt keeps his face hidden as he nudges his knees open, trailing kisses along his neck while his fingers dip between his legs. He works him open with steady fascination, with one finger and then, quickly, two, astonished by how easily Ben takes them, his eyes screwed shut and his head thrown back. He mouths at Ben’s Adam’s apple as his fingers pump faster, trying to stay present but finding himself getting lost in Ben’s scent, in the image of his cock dripping and twitching on his

stomach, in the tremble of his thighs. There's a hot twist in the pit of his stomach as Ben clenches and sighs Matt's name — unable to reckon with the unimpeachable fact that he's doing this to Ben, that it's Ben so wet around him, that Ben likes this so much he can't help begging for more.

"Matty," Ben pants, grabbing his wrist, and — Jesus, making him go harder, fucking himself with Matt's hand.

Matt is transfixed by the sight of it. He feels paralyzed, unable to move without guidance. "Ben," he says weakly.

Ben's eyelids flutter, looking at Matt all half-lidded and lusty. "You want me to tell you how I like it?" he murmurs, stroking Matt's chest. His other hand hasn't ceased its movements, but he's slowed a bit, rolling his hips down on Matt's fingers leisurely. "You *need* me to tell you?"

Matt groans, his face scalding. He nibbles sheepishly at Ben's neck, lapping at the trickling beads of sweat, feeling exposed. "Yes," he admits.

"I can do that," he says, easing Matt's hand out of him with a wince. "Sit up a little for me, baby."

They do this like they do everything else, it turns out. It's sort of like being back on set, with Ben directing and Matt performing. Ben pushing him to be better, unaware that Matt is always — intrinsically, unconsciously — better under Ben's watchful gaze. *More lube*, Ben says, and then *Grab my ass*, and then *You can go hard, don't hold back*, and then *Come here, I want you right here*. They're face to face, Matt leaning on his forearms, when he sinks into Ben's tight warmth with an animalistic groan, immediately overwhelmed by the feeling of being enveloped by him.

"Talk to me," Ben demands.

"Of course you want to talk right now," Matt manages, grinning when Ben pinches his side. "How do I feel?"

"Feel so good," Ben breathes, the praise making Matt's cock throb. "Harder, Matty — yeah, *yes*, fuck, you're killing me."

Matt bears down on him, his hips finding a fast rhythm, spurred on by Ben's shuddering gasps. "All those times on set — when you'd touch me, when you watched me—" The words are an effort; all Matt can do

is breathe through it. He is so achingly aware of his body, of every sweep of his chest hair against Ben's, of Ben's cock dripping against his abdomen. "When you'd grab me in front of everyone, like you were staking your fucking claim, this — this is what you wanted, isn't it?"

Ben offers a blissed out little smile. "I *wanted* to make a good movie," he says, which makes them both snicker. Matt angles his hips and snaps them sharply, hitting a spot that lights Ben up. "*Yes*, fuck," he moans. "Of course I did. I kept hoping one day you'd just, like, break and fuck me. Fantasized about it." He rakes his nails down the expanse of Matt's back. "Before that, too. Fucking — always. Always wanted you like this."

The confirmation is almost too much to handle, sending Matt's malfunctioning brain careening to the brink of insanity. "God, you're so—" But he can't get the rest of the thought out before it escapes him entirely, and from there he fades away into a series of heaving breaths and grunts as he pounds Ben, who holds him close, murmuring words of encouragement between his noises of pleasure. At one point, Matt's sweaty knees skid on the sheets, jolting him back into the present as his cock slips out of Ben, laughing a little as he readjusts.

Matt kisses him apologetically. "Shit, sorry," he says, and stays there, mouth pressed to Ben's, liking the feeling of Ben's breath ghosting along his cheekbone, the plush cushion of his swollen lips.

Ben makes an *uh-uh* sound. "Don't you dare apologize while you're fucking me."

Matt laughs again, right into Ben's mouth. "I'm beyond apologies? That how good I am?"

"You're perfect," Ben murmurs, and kisses him, and kisses him, and kisses him again, his hips pushing up to meet Matt's every thrust. "Matty, make me come," he says on a whine that sounds like it's being ripped out of him. He throws his other leg around Matt's waist, grabbing at Matt's cheek with one big hand, a desperate look on his face. "*Fuck*, right there, 'til I come."

The command sends a fissure of heat rocketing down Matt's spine, wanting so badly to give Ben his release. He kisses the heel of Ben's hand, palming his ass as he fucks him in earnest, until Ben's a whimpering mess beneath him. The air around them is thick and quiet but for the obscene sounds of their bodies, of Matt's pants and Ben's

throaty orders, his *fuck* and *yeah, yeah* and *harder, faster* and *so fucking good*. Matt wedges a hand between them to get a hand around Ben's cock, and it only takes a couple of strokes before Ben's spilling over his fist, arching into Matt as he comes with a guttural groan and a final gasp of Matt's name. Ben runs his thumb over Matt's lips, seeming choked, speechless, but Matt takes it as a signal to move, so he does, fucking Ben through the aftershocks.

"That's it," Ben says, and keeps saying it as Matt comes with a cry, his orgasm startling him with how powerfully it slams into him. His hips drive erratically into Ben, filling him, and for a few seconds, or minutes, or days, or weeks, the noise in his head quiets, his thoughts going peacefully, beautifully blank.

*

"This has got to be the worst one," Matt says, tracing the red arc of the hideous phoenix tail where it stretches down over the curve of Ben's bare asscheek. "On your *ass*, man?"

Ben, lying on his stomach and hugging the pillow under his head, squints at him. "I didn't hear you complaining about my ass earlier."

"I like your ass," Matt says, giving it a light smack to prove it. "And I also think the artist who did this should be put in jail."

Ben squints at him some more before springing forward to tackle Matt with a startling burst of energy, launching an attack of kisses against his face.

"Oh my god," Matt laughs, trying in vain to bat him away, "You're worse than the fucking dogs. Down boy."

Ben growls but goes without resistance when Matt wrestles him on his back and folds himself against his side. He is so fucking ancient that he has to be careful, the old collarbone injury still twinging after all these years, but Ben is patient while he gets comfortable. His head drops to Ben's shoulder, his nose burrowing into the hollow of his throat. Ben reaches for the corner of the duvet, pulling it over them. They lay like that for a while, touching each other idly, listening to each other's breaths.

Matt thumbs over one of Ben's nipples. He feels warm and woozy in a way that's making words come naturally. "Have you done that before?"

"Done what?"

Matt mimes a crude blowjob gesture with his hand and mouth, just to make Ben laugh.

"You can't freak out."

"Are we twelve? Just tell me."

Ben slides an arm under Matt, his hand curling around his shoulder. "Yeah, when I was like fifteen, there was a boy at camp. We experimented."

Matt schools his face into neutrality as he, implausibly, sees red. "At *camp*? You never told me."

"Because I knew you'd be weird about it, just like you're being weird right now," Ben says, this infuriatingly knowing little grin on his face. He wraps his other arm around Matt, hugging him tightly. "Obviously I think of him constantly and pine for his life-altering cock every single day."

Matt rolls his eyes, squirming in Ben's vice grip. "Al*right*. That's the only time?"

"And, okay," Ben sighs. "Sometimes Jen and I… you know, she has a…"

Matt's head pops up fast. "Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't still be good at it if the last time I'd done it was when I was fifteen, let's put it like that," Ben says, giving Matt a significant look, confirming his theory. He tries not to think about it, but the images come flooding in: Ben on his knees in front of Jen, her neatly manicured nails clutching his hair, his head bobbing enthusiastically in her lap, just as he'd done with Matt. And then, even worse, Ben on his back, Jen between his legs—

Matt's brow furrows like he's doing calculations. "Does she fuck you? With the…"

"What do you think, Matt?"

“I honestly make a conscious effort to never think about you guys fucking,” Matt snaps. “Despite your many efforts.”

Ben pokes his ribs. “What do you mean?”

“*No, man, I don’t even like the attention*,” Matt says in a gruff approximation of Ben’s voice. “He insists, with his hands all over his wife’s ass, in full view of every camera in LA. *I’m actually a really private person*.”

Ben laughs. “Oh, yeah? Is that what I sound like?”

“That’s what you sound like,” Matt grumbles.

“You’re such a petty little bitch,” Ben says, sounding delighted. “You have all these evil fucking thoughts rolling around your brain twenty-four-fucking-seven and nobody even knows. It all comes out post-orgasm.”

Matt butts his nose against Ben’s stupid chin. “Yeah, you ran away too fast last time to find out.”

Ben strokes his bicep, quieting.

“Now you have nothing to say,” Matt mutters.

“What do you want me to say?”

Matt shrugs. “You ever gonna tell me what that was about?”

“You were there, man,” Ben says. He’s a furnace under Matt, the languid motion of his hand on Matt’s skin almost meditative. It feels like they’re on their own planet. “I was, as fucking always, rolling with what you were giving me.”

“I didn’t ask you to do any of that.”

“I sensed a vibe. Was I wrong?”

“And then you left.”

“Yeah, well, I realized that was the only kind of thing you’d ever want me for and it bummed me out. I didn’t want to be there anymore.”

There’s no possible defense to that. Matt can only think to say, in a quiet voice, “That’s not true.”

“I know that now,” Ben says, still petting his arm. “Jen thinks I’m too reactive to you. She said that was another situation where I let you set the terms.”

It takes a second for the meaning of the words to compute. When it does, Matt shakes his head, aghast. “You *told her*?”

Ben makes a face like, *duh*. “Yeah, of course. You didn’t tell Lucy?” Matt falls silent, which is answer enough. Ben skates a hand down his spine. “I told her while we were fighting,” he admits, a laugh in his voice. “Blurted it out just because I kind of wanted to piss her off more.”

Matt feels self-conscious — blushy. “What happened?”

Ben rolls his eyes. “At first she was like, ‘Of course you did, I would expect nothing less from you, you’re a cheater,’ all of that.”

“You *are* a cheater,” says Matt hypocritically.

Ben shrugs. He looks at Matt for a prolonged beat. Adds, “And then we had some pretty weird sex.”

Matt has no idea how to take that, but feels an unmistakable stirring heat between his legs that he tries to will away. “Okay.”

Pressed up against each other like this, Ben doesn’t miss it, looking at Matt with interest. “I’m *sorry*, is that making you hard, Matthew?”

“It’s making me… something,” Matt says, lifting the duvet to check. For a few seconds, they watch in fascination as his cock sluggishly fills against Ben’s thigh. “I didn’t even know that could still happen so soon after.”

“Look at what I inspire in you,” Ben says, giving his ass a squeeze. “Which part did it, me telling my wife I made you jerk off in front of me or the thought of us having sex about you?”

“All of it,” Matt says mournfully, dull embarrassment thudding through him. He lowers the covers and says, finally, like he’s shedding a weight he hadn’t known he’d been carrying, “And you didn’t make me. I wanted to.”

“I know you did,” Ben says, pushing gently on the small of Matt’s back, encouraging him to grind forward, which Matt does, rolling his hips unhurriedly. “I know you wanted everything we’ve ever done

together. I just never knew if you knew."

"I always knew," Matt murmurs. His arousal is building languidly, he feels almost stoned with the dreamlike ease of it. "I got through by telling myself it wasn't a big deal, but I always knew." He hitches his leg up a bit, giving himself a better angle. "Are you gonna tell her about this?"

"Probably," Ben says, and chuckles at the way Matt's hips stutter. "I thought you hated her. Really?"

"It's not her specifically," Matt says, hiding his burning face between Ben's pecs. "It's actually not her at all."

He doesn't know what more he can say, can't make sense of how profoundly turned on he is by the idea of Ben fucking his wife with Matt on his mind, of Ben forcing Jen to have Matt on her mind too. It feels like the answer to a question he's been too afraid to ask for most of his life. He moans softly into Ben's skin, snaking an arm around his waist.

"Come on, baby," Ben whispers, his voice a tranquilizing rumble. He presses his hand harder into Matt's back and Matt lets go, rutting against Ben's thigh until he comes again, splattering on Ben's groin. When he tilts his face up for a kiss, Ben meets him halfway, a sweet press of lips.

Matt settles back down on his chest, feeling that clear-headed sense of simplicity all over again. "She's, I mean — she's not okay with this, is she? You and me, like this?"

"Fuck no," says Ben. "But we just — it's hard to describe. You know how with you and me, we're beyond certain things? We just, like, get each other? It's kind of like that with me and her, too."

An overpowering wave of sadness washes over Matt. He gets it — he really, really does. Everything Matt and Ben have been through, everything Ben and Jen have been through: different, but the same. "Right," he says, his voice catching.

"Hey," Ben murmurs, kissing his forehead.

"No, no," Matt says, reaching down so he can lace their fingers together, letting them rest over Ben's stomach. "It's good. I'm good."

"You always say that," Ben says gently.

“I actually mean it this time.” The second orgasm dissociated him a bit, making him feel floaty, like he’s stepped outside his own body. It’s not a bad feeling, exactly. “You remember that first time in my mom’s house that one summer? When we were kids?”

Ben’s thumb rubs tenderly over the back of his hand. “Of course.”

“I remember feeling so much younger than you,” Matt says, dozing against him. “You seemed like you knew everything. The way you touched me. How you talked to me.”

“I can’t believe all that fake confidence worked on you,” Ben says. “*I* remember being scared as fuck. I didn’t know shit.”

“You *didn’t* know shit? Past tense?” Matt teases, smiling when Ben swats at his ass.

“I just wanted to impress you,” Ben says. His lips are at Matt’s hairline, feather light. “All I ever wanted to do was impress you. I guess that never really stopped.”

“Well,” Matt says. “Mission accomplished. Several times over.”

Ben makes a happy humming sound. “You wanna stay?”

“Yeah,” Matt says, and doesn’t bother acknowledging the unspoken reality: *But I can’t.*

“Yeah,” Ben agrees, reading his mind. A few seconds pass, and then: “Hey, how the fuck did Portman get you smoking again?”

Matt huffs a laugh. “I mean, I was kind of drunk. And I was mad at you, and she just happened to be there, you know, smoking. It was circumstantial.” He thinks about it, and then remembers something: “I think she could tell I was feeling weird, or something. She, uh — she told me I should go home to my kids.”

When Ben doesn’t respond, Matt fights against the fatigue to blink up at him. He finds Ben already gazing at him, a sad little smile on his face. “That’s good advice.”

*

Three Months Later

It's Isabella's fault they're running late to lunch — she'd changed outfits four times, from jeans to dress to skirt, only to ultimately come back to jeans ("Dad, it's *JLo*," she'd said with a look like he was the world's biggest idiot when he made the mistake of asking why she was taking so long) — but he takes the fall for it when they get there rather than embarrass her, though he's pretty sure from the grin on Ben's face that he sees through the lie.

"Did you guys order?" Matt asks, dropping into the empty seat next to Jen. He looks to Ben on her other side, taking in his thick sweater, amused. "You chilly here out east, Affleck? Hollywood *has* changed you."

Ben frowns. "Back in my day, spring meant something."

It *is* an unseasonably cold end to March in New York, winter clinging stubbornly to the air even on a sunny afternoon like this. But: "You're from Boston," Matt points out.

"And you're annoying," Ben says.

Jen, immaculate in a thin white turtleneck, rests a hand on Ben's arm, effectively ending this back and forth. "We didn't order yet," she says. "We wanted to wait for you."

Matt nods, reaching for his menu but not opening it. Diners at the tables around them are glancing over and just as quickly looking away, which is easy to pay little mind to. On this random Sunday afternoon in Dumbo, no one dares approach.

"You guys have any luck with the place you saw yesterday?" Matt asks.

Jen's arm stretches across the back of Ben's chair. "I liked it, he hated it."

"I didn't *hate* it," Ben says mildly. "I just — am I seriously an Upper East Side guy now? Is that where I'm at in my life? It's so fucking… stuffy."

Matt meets Jen's gaze. They share an eye roll.

“Stop pretending to be humble,” Matt says. “No one believes you and it’s really boring.”

Jen gives Ben a look like, *see*. “I want to find somewhere we both like before he heads home, but he’s dragging his feet.”

“My opinion counts for less,” Ben insists. “It’s not like I’m gonna be there all that often.”

Matt crosses his arms, offended. “Ouch.”

Ben turns his nose up. “Well, you replaced me with Hemsworth, so frankly I don’t even know how much more we have to say to each other.”

“Here we go,” Matt mumbles.

Jen pats Ben’s shoulder. “You guys should get matching tattoos next. His feelings are a little hurt.”

“We’d never agree on anything because Ben’s allergic to subtlety and I’m not interested in putting mythological birds on my body,” Matt tells her. To Ben, “I didn’t get *matching* tattoos with him, by the way. We happened to decide to get new ones at the same time and it wasn’t even a big deal, so you can relax.”

“*Can* I?”

Matt sips from the water glass in front of him. “You can.”

“*It’s not a big deal* — that’s Matt’s favorite line,” Ben stage whispers to Jen.

Jen smirks knowingly. “Oh, I’m aware.”

Ben laughs, and Matt blushes, and then Ben laughs at Matt blushing. Between them, Jen looks smugly proud of herself. Matt glances at the kids, who are mercifully not paying any attention to this. For all of Isabella’s fussing, she and Emme are fully ignoring them, giggling over something on Emme’s phone.

Jen, wearing the expression of someone who knows she has the biggest dick in the room, asks, “Where’s Lucy today?”

“Stella’s friend’s having a birthday party, so she’s on chaperone duty,” Matt says. “She says hi.”

“We should all get together before I leave,” Ben says, all good-natured camaraderie.

Matt nods. “And when is that again?”

“Thursday. Work and kids call to me.”

Matt turns to Jen. “You’re here until beginning of May, right?”

Jen nods. “Maybe we can meet for dinner without—” She puts her hand next to Ben’s face and makes a playful *blah, blah, blah* gesture.

Matt laughs. “I’d like that,” he says honestly.

Ben’s head swivels between them, looking as suspicious as he does excited. “What the fuck are you guys gonna talk about?”

Matt pretends to think about it. “Maybe I’ll tell her about the time you got dumped so bad Casey and I had to physically restrain you from going all John Cusack outside her window.” He feigns a wince in Jen’s direction. “He was gonna play Wham.”

Jen raises her eyebrows. “Careless Whisper?”

Matt shakes his head gravely. “Where Did Your Heart Go.”

Jen cocks her head at Ben. “You never did that for me.”

“I never did it for anyone, honey, because I’d never do something like that. Uh,” Ben says, leaning forward on his elbow so abruptly he almost sends his silverware clattering to the floor. He points a stern finger at Matt, but he’s grinning, wearing that fond expression Matt’s never really seen him get with anyone else. “First, you’re a liar. And actually, what I remember is that you’d also been recently dumped around that time and were *deep* in your crying in the bathtub phase. Couldn’t take a piss without listening to you sniffling.”

Hearing this, Isabella leans over, always eager to add another story about Matt embarrassing himself to her arsenal. “Is that true?”

“No,” Matt says.

“Yes,” Ben says.

As Ben starts regaling her with the ugly details, Matt studies him in the natural light streaming in through the restaurant’s big windows, enjoying how bright his eyes look in the sun, how his whole body

comes to full, energetic life as he gets into it.

He notices Jen watching him watching, and he releases a soft, embarrassed laugh. She gives him a private little nod, briefly covering Matt's hand with her own before turning back to Ben, a big, luminous smile on her face.

Chapter End Notes

happy pride to matt damon and ben affleck, somehow!!!!! here's a little playlist i made for this fic:

"head over heels," tears for fears
"to find a friend," tom petty
"the first taste," fiona apple
"empire line," the national
"i know (i know)," john lennon
"backstreets," bruce springsteen
"the promise," when in rome
"bizarre love triangle," new order
"b2b," charli xcx
"crack baby," mitski
"ill with want," the avett brothers
"between the bars," elliott smith
"tried to tell you," the weather station
"if you had my love," jennifer lopez ;)
"cool," gwen stefani
"massachusetts," bee gees

in the immortal words of nora ephron… anyway, it's about old friends. thank you so much for reading! <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!